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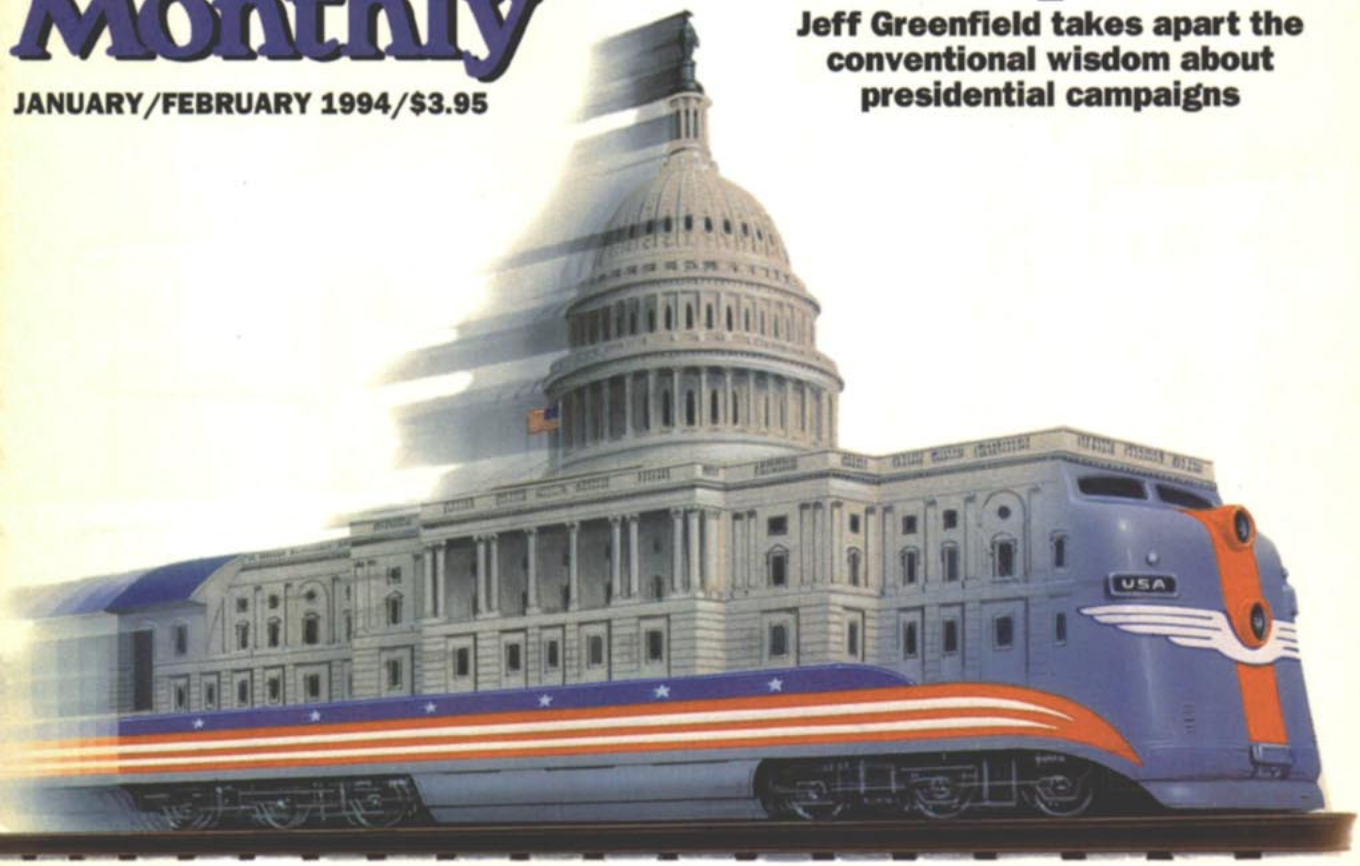
James Fallows on the McLaughlinization of the media

Jeff Greenfield takes apart the conventional wisdom about presidential campaigns



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By Nicholas Lemann

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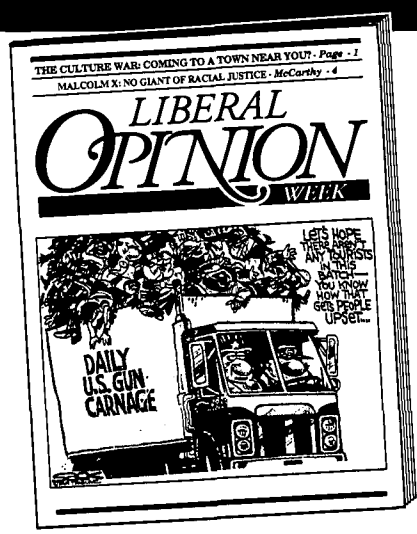

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The Washington Monthly

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Letters

Harold Who?

Reading Arthur Schlesinger's review of the biography of Harold Laski ["Left Out," November] reminded me of hearing him when I was a senior at Amherst, in the years 1932-33. A paragraph in my book *First Rough Draft*, which recounted this speech, might explain why Laski is forgotten today:

"One who visited Amherst to talk of the larger world was Harold Laski, the London School of Economics professor whose influence was immense on a generation or more of British as well as Asian and African students. Laski, discussing Hitler and Mussolini, then saw in Germany a swing to the left that he thought would oust Hitler, and by uniting Russia and Germany, make half of Europe communist. England, as well as the rest of Europe, save France and Scandinavia, he went on, would pass through a form of facism. The contrast between the increasing prosperity in Russia, said Laski, and increasing poverty in other countries would force those others to reconsider the bases of their own economic and political institutions."

Chalmers M. Roberts
Bethesda, MD

Fed Excellence

Facts prove your comments on civil service employees to be nothing but unfounded fed-bashing ["Tilting at Windmills," October].

Statistics from the U.S. Office of Personnel Management for 1990 show that of the 1.1 million full-time permanent federal employees in the General Schedule, only .5 percent were evaluated at an Unacceptable or Marginally Acceptable level.

By contrast, 33.5 percent were rated Fully Successful while 66 percent earned Highly Successful or Outstanding.

In addition, studies from the Congressional Budget Office have shown federal sector productivity increasing at a faster rate than comparable private sector productivity.

So stop throwing around phrases like "somewhere around a third of federal employees are of marginal or worse quality. . ." if you don't have valid numbers to prove it.

Robert M. Tobias
National President, National Treasury Employees Union
Washington, DC

Which Doors Revolve?

In November's "Tilting at Windmills," you made the point that journalists should have some government experience.

In other issues you have often argued against the "revolving door" process through which people with government experience go into corporate or lobbying jobs.

When is government experience bad, and when is it good? Your views need some explanation. Perhaps reporters would be unlikely to write critical pieces about the persons who befriended them while they were in government service. Perhaps public-interest lobbies would be less useful and perceptive if their staff kept out of government on principle.

Without further explanation, you seem to be saying only that government experience is good for your friends and bad for your enemies, which is not a very useful distinction. Or maybe you are saying that some government experience is good but too much is bad, which is not much more helpful.

Please clarify.

Stuart A. Ross
Irvine, CA

Charles Peters replies: *The preceding two letters charge my batteries because they are about the two keys to making government work—which this issue of the* Monthly *is dedicated to saying can and must be done—that most people are completely unaware of.*

First, government won't work unless we attract better people at all levels, from the bottom of the civil service to the top of the cabinet. If you've dealt with any government agency recently, you know that the percentage of incompetency is considerably more than the one

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half of one percent that Mr. Tobias and the civil service unions admit.

Second, the press has to understand the government well enough to report intelligently, to alert the public to what's really working and what's not. To do this, experience inside government would obviously help. If that experience is gained before the person becomes a reporter, there is not a conflict of interest problem. If it is of the David Gergen/Strobe Talbott variety, the pluses and the minuses are visible for us all to see. So, even where the experience poses a danger of conflict, I favor having the experience and having the public know about it so that the public can judge whether the conflict is harmful.

Unnatural Gas

You mention that a pet cause of your is the "non-polluting car" ["Tilting at Windmills," December].

Just what is a non-polluting car? The car is using energy as it's being driven; where is that energy coming from? At the very least, a polluting electric power plant is spewing a very measurable extra quality of pollutants into the air as each of these GM electric cars is plugged in and recharging. There is no free lunch. The laws of thermodynamics hold.

And as for Ford delivering natural gas cars in 1995, you say that "Compared to gasoline, natural gas costs only 70 cents a gallon. . ." You neglect to mention, possibly out of ignorance, the other very necessary part of the equation: that while the price of a gallon of natural gas is only 7/10ths that of gasoline, the same gallon of natural gas only produces 5/10ths the energy of the gallon of gasoline. Therefore, a tank of natural gas will take you fewer miles than that same tank filled with gasoline. In other words, natural gas costs more per mile to use than gasoline.

This is the perfect example of what happens when someone (usually a politician) without even a rudimentary training in basic physics takes a technical issue and tries to force it on others. This is why a firm foundation in the basic sciences (typically biology, chemistry, and physics) is necessary for everyone in all walks of life, even those with a strong yearning to become—or already are—journalists or politicians.

Adam Frix
Columbus, Ohio

Overdrive

Your November "Tilting at Windmills" piece on haggling for cars missed some nastier aspects of that horrible milieu. The average American would rather go to the dentist than into a car showroom. And, you might think, on the face of it, that dealers would dislike the discounts trumpeted by the makers because they could cut into their profits. You'd be wrong. They actually like the discounts because they discourage buyers from haggling any further, even if those discounts were merely reductions from an originally inflated premium asked of suckers.

Here in California, when demand was more in line with supply (the industry currently has 25-30 percent world overcapacity), dealers would write huge markups—$2-3,000—onto the price sticker, over and above the MSRP, for example on the VW Rabbit/Golf, then a $10-12,000 car. I asked about this and was told that it was "our profit." "But isn't that included in the MSRP?" "No—it's just a premium we charge, because we can get it." "Not from me," I said.

John Jose
Los Altos, CA

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Tilting at Windmills

One of the problems that has emerged from the U.N. peacekeeping missions for which so many of us held such high hopes is that some member countries have committed troops that are not exactly top of the line. Take the 800-man Bulgarian contingent in Cambodia. Roughly 30 percent were convicts released to make prison space available back home in Sofia. They—or at least a dozen or so—threatened to kill Lt. General John Sanderson, the U.N. commander, if he did not raise their pay. On their flight home they wrecked the inside of the aircraft as female flight attendants took refuge in the cockpit to escape assault. . . .

In the section of the IKEA Christmas catalog devoted to fancy cooking utensils there is a picture of a chic woman saying: "I bought a huge array of [IKEA utensils] this year because it's my turn to cook the family holiday dinner. Everything looks so impressive, I hope no one notices the food is from the restaurant down the street.". . .

Can you believe the way respectable Washington jumped all over Surgeon General Joycelyn Elders for suggesting that drug legalization be considered as a way of reducing crime? "I'm shocked," said Rep. Charles B. Rangel. "I think when a top public official of the U.S. talks publicly about the legalization of drugs it is time for that official to resign," said Rep. Newt Gingrich. Of course the truth is that reasonable men have privately talked about the wisdom of legalization for years. Elders deserves the highest praise for being one of the few to have the guts to drag the subject out of the closet. . . .

I'm delighted to report that James Glassman, who recently began writing a column for the business section of *The Washington Post*, shares our concern about the disincentive to employment that is caused by such benefits as health insurance and Social Security. He cites evidence that hours worked per employee per week recently equalled the post-World War II high, which suggests that to meet the demand created by an improving economy, employers are not creating new jobs but are instead requiring their current employees to work longer hours.

The only solution that Glassman sees is to reduce the overall cost of benefits. Certainly that could be done in some ways (such as by capping medical fees or by denying Social Security payments to the affluent), but there are other approaches to solving the problem that would reduce the tax burden on employment. One is to have a higher tax on higher incomes with rates comparable to those in the fifties, when such rates certainly did not discourage economic growth. Another is the value added tax (VAT) that has been in effect in many countries for years. It is a tax on consumption that could make a lot of economic sense for this country because it would encourage savings and capital formation. On the other hand, it could help cause a recession if it's implemented as ineptly as it was by Canada's Brian Mulroney in 1991. In other words, we should carefully consider the VAT's pluses and

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minuses. Perhaps the answer lies in a combination of it and of higher taxes on the rich, because then the VAT's regressivity would be balanced by the progressivity of the higher income tax. Whatever plan we choose, an essential objective should be to reduce the disincentive to employment that the high costs of health and retirement benefits constitute when they are financed, as they are now, by what are in effect payroll taxes. . . .

In this respect I was depressed to learn that the Clinton administration abandoned consideration of the value added tax as a way of financing its health program simply because a poll conducted by White House pollster Stanley Greenberg showed no support for it. Why should the public have supported it? The administration had made no effort to explain the advantages of the VAT as against the employer-employee tax. If it had, there is a good chance the public would have realized that the VAT might have meant they could have health care without endangering their jobs. . . .

Speaking of Clinton's health program, one aspect of it that is profoundly right is the provision that encourages nurses to do as much of a physician's work as they are capable of performing. The physicians are outraged. A brochure published by the California Medical Association's political action committee begins:

"Warning! The California Medical Association has determined that health care reforms which. . . broaden the scope of practice for non-physician groups is dangerous to the public's health."

As anyone who has ever been to a hospital knows, on the whole nurses are nicer than doctors, more humane, more concerned, and more willing to listen. And as I learned 30 years ago evaluating Peace Corps medical programs, some nurses know as much or more than some doctors and are often more competent at procedures such as suturing. When they have demonstrated such knowledge and competence, nurses should be permitted to perform the tasks for which they are qualified without regard to the damage to the physicians' egos and pocketbooks. . . .

It's not a disaster unless the television cameras are there. We all know it's true. But nothing proves it like Burundi where a recent tribal slaughter killed 150,000—the same way an eerily similar number died in 1972. But the world paid no attention to either tragedy. No one from ABC, CBS, NBC, or CNN was there. . . .

One of the great cons of the banking and savings and loan industry—the escrow account—is at last threatened with reform legislation sponsored by House Banking Committee Chairman Henry Gonzalez and supported by the Clinton administration. The escrow account costs the typical home owner several hundred dollars a month above what he actually owes on his mortgage. It is used by the lending institution to pay such costs as property taxes and insurance premiums. The catch is that lenders usually require the borrower to pay considerably more than is needed to cover these costs. This might not be so bad if interest were paid on the escrow funds, but in most states it is not. So the homeowner loses twice over: The lender is actually getting an interest free loan from the borrower on a loan part of which the lender didn't really need in the first place. And in case you've forgotten, a mortgage is supposed to involve the advance of funds from the lender to the borrower, not the other way around. . . .

This reminds me of another banking scam. When I was a boy back home in Charleston,

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West Virginia, I can remember when my mother or father overdrew their bank account, someone at the bank would call them and they would have an opportunity to replenish the account before the bank bounced a check. Today, as alas most of us know, there is no phone call, just the embarrassment of the rubber check and a penalty charged against your account. The chance to charge the penalty is the reason the bank likes to bounce your check. Last year, banks collected $4.35 billion in bounced check fees. Well, you ask, don't they incur expenses for which they should have the right to charge? They do, but the banks' expenses amounted to only $685 million, meaning they made a profit of $3.67 billion on the penalties . . . .

The mentality of the cigarette companies' leaders was recently revealed by a transcript of depositions taken in a case brought by airline flight attendants who contend that their exposure to cabin smoke caused them to develop cancer and other illnesses. The first question by the flight attendants' attorney was directed to William I. Campbell, the president of Philip Morris:

"Q: Does cigarette smoking cause lung cancer?

"A: To my knowledge, it's not been proven that cigarette smoking causes cancer.

"Q: If somebody is a two-pack-a-day smoker for 20 years, and they get lung cancer, and every medical person is satisfied the reason that the person got lung cancer was because he smoked, you are saying it is not proven?

"A: That is correct. That is what I am saying.

"Q: Can you name a single scientist or medical doctor who has—who today will publicly say that he or she doesn't believe that it's been proven that cigarette smoking causes cancer? Somebody not employed by the tobacco industry, or never got money from the tobacco industry?

"A: I can't answer it."

Andrew H. Tisch, the chairman and CEO of Lorillard, was asked:

"Q: Does cigarette smoking cause cancer?

"A: I don't believe so.

"Q: Based on what?

"A: Based on my understanding of the scientific and statistical evidence that's been presented.

"Q: What is your understanding of the scientific and statistical evidence that's been presented?

"A: There's been no conclusive scientific evidence that's been presented that convinces me that cigarette smoking causes cancer.

"Q: As far as you're concerned, Mr. Tisch, as chairman and chief executive officer of Lorillard, this warning on the package which says that smoking causes lung cancer, heart disease and emphysema is inaccurate? You don't believe it's true?

"A: That's correct.

"Q: Because if you believed it were true, in good conscience you wouldn't sell this to Americans, would you, or foreigners, for that matter?

"A: That's correct."

And then Bennet S. Le Bow, head of the company that owns Liggett, was questioned:

"Q: Is it fair to say, then, that since you're satisfied that you have a legal right to sell cigarettes, you have never really explored or studied the issue of whether or not cigarettes cause disease?

"A: That is absolutely correct.

"Q: If I asked you, does smoking cause lung cancer. . .

"A: I don't know.

"Q: O.K., and you really don't care because you're selling a legal product?

"A: Correct." . . .

Many years ago Congress enacted a civil service system for the executive branch. It is

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interesting, however, that members of Congress have never wanted their own employees to be part of the civil service. The reason is that they have wanted to have the freedom to fire incompetents and those who might sabotage policies the legislators were elected to pursue. A congressman interested in health reform, for example, does not want to be saddled with a tenured staff that might be more sympathetic to lobbyists for the health industry. So Congress reserves the right to fire staffers.

Why shouldn't the executive branch have the same interest in accountability? The truth is that no one in the civil service unions or in Congress wants to face this inconsistency, and the press has failed to inform the public about it. The facts are that there isn't nearly enough accountability in the executive branch, and there's too much turnover in congressional staff. Doesn't this suggest that the best system for both congressional and executive branch employees would be the one that the *Monthly* has long advocated in which employees could be divided roughly half and half between career civil servants and those who can be fired at any time? This has always seemed to us a reasonable compromise between the interests of accountability and those of continuity. . . .

Getting distinguished university professors to actually teach instead of merely collecting high salaries for the luster their names bring to their institutions has often seemed to be an impossible dream, pursued only by a handful of eccentrics consisting largely of the editors of *The Washington Monthly*. But the eccentrics can take heart. Thanks to recent books by Charles Sykes and Martin Anderson that have highlighted the scandal and to the strained university budgets that are at last forcing academic administrators to consider such hitherto bizarre strategies as the efficient use of faculty, some of the stars are getting chalkdust on their clothes again.

But even this small progress seems to require bribery. According to a recent article by William H. Honan in *The New York Times*, the luminaries are being lured back to classrooms by promises that they can design their own courses. At the University of California, for example, one department head was cajoled into actually encountering students by being allowed to teach a course on women in science fiction.

The University of Chicago has an approach that, even though it's still bribery, I like a little better. "We ask them to design the basic required courses," explains Dean John W. Boyer, "and most people who spend a year or two doing that develop an interest in teaching these courses." The result is that 41 percent of the professors are now teaching such courses. But at some institutions the stars still don't come out for students. At Texas A&M, for example, neither Norman Borlaug, a distinguished professor of international agriculture, or Sir Derek H. Richard Barton, a distinguished professor of chemistry, have taught undergraduate classes in years.

And it should be noted that students have a right not only to get the stars in the classroom but to know who grades their papers and exams. At Columbia, I was always comforted to recognize the handwriting of the Lionel

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Trillings and Mark Van Dorens in the comments written on my papers and exams—even though I sometimes felt the comments could have been a bit more charitable. . . .

The *Monthly* has long argued against the blind faith in credentials that afflicts so many professions. Medicine (where doctors keep competent nurses down) is one example I mentioned earlier in this column. An equally good illustration of how credentialism can get the best of common sense is in education.

Take the case of Robert Barnett, who may lose his job despite the fact that he has won two national teaching awards for his skill in teaching science and technology at the North Metcalfe Elementary School in Metcalfe County, Kentucky. The reason is Kentucky law requires that within five years of becoming certified, teachers must enroll in a master's degree program. Barnett spends several evenings a week teaching adult education courses and wants to spend the rest of his time with his family instead of acquiring another credential. He says, "I don't think a master's degree a teacher makes." Thank goodness, an increasing number of people agree. Kentucky Governor Brereton Jones' Task Force on Teacher Preparation has recommended that teachers become certified based on how they perform in the classroom not on the course credits or degrees they accumulate.

Of course, keeping up with developments in one's field helps one perform better, but continuing evaluation of performance is the best way to determine whether a teacher is maintaining his skill. . . .

It now develops that while Congress was witholding $1.5 million in aid to get the Haitian military regime to encourage reform, the CIA was slipping that gang of corrupt colonels $500,000 to $1 million in under-the-table financing. And it turns out that what *The New York Times* calls "one crucial source of information for American intelligence" against the democratically elected president, Father Aristide, was Lt. General Raoul Cédras, the leader of the corrupt Hatian military. For years, according to the *Times*, the CIA actually funded the Hatian intelligence agency, SIN. The agency was supposed to help in the international war against drugs. Instead, it has been involved in the drug trade itself.

"It was a military organization that distributed drugs in Haiti," an official who worked at our embassy in Port-au-Prince in 1991 and 1992 recently told the *Times*. "It never produced drug intelligence."

Some of you will detect echoes in this of the sad story of Air America, the CIA's airline in southeast Asia during the Vietnam era, which also became heavily involved in drug trafficking. Isn't it time to take stock of the CIA? Does it produce enough useful intelligence to justify its repeated excursions into these covert stupidities?. . .

Let us pray that the ability of the FAA to assure the air safety of the rest of us is not indicated by its ability to provide the safe operation of its own planes. In 1989, an internal report at FAA said that the agency needed a program to ensure the safe operation of its own aircraft, but according to *The Washington Post* no such program has been developed. The result is that three FAA employees were killed in a crash on October 26th. That happened because the pilot wasn't using instruments in foggy weather and plowed into the top of a hillside that his eyes told him to be 2,000 feet in altitude when the instruments, if he had been using them, would have said 2,400 was the correct figure.

Investigators, according to the *Post*, found several examples of poor judgment by the pilot on previous flights, including flying with visual flight rules when poor weather required instruments, and departing on flights without obtaining weather information or filing a flight plan. Even his fellow crew members had accused him of safety violations.

Why then did the FAA permit him to fly? . . .

There *is* hope. Those of you from New York who are of mature years are aware of the continuing scandal of the New York city school custodians, second only to the corruption among building inspectors and

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the police in the frequency of their recurrence on the front pages over the years. The New York school custodians, who elsewhere are called janitors, are paid extravagant salaries, fail to keep schools clean, and insist on being bribed to open schools at night for the use of community groups. They have been protected in these practices by legislators who will never oppose labor unions, most especially Local 891 of the International Union of Operating Engineers—gee, that's even better than "custodians"—which is a generous contributor of campaign funds. Anyway, according to *The New York Times*, the state legislature has finally displayed a little courage and has given the Board of Education the power to set performance standards for the cleaning and maintenance of the schools and permit principals to evaluate custodians by these standards to determine promotion and demotion. Why didn't the board and principals always have such powers? Aren't they just plain common sense? . . .

Speaking of liberalism gone mad, have you heard the story of Bernard McCummings? His profession was mugging. While attempting to rob and strangle a 71-year-old in a subway station, a transit cop heard the victim's cries and found him on the station platform being throttled by McCummings. When the officer appeared, McCummings fled, leaving a bloodied victim behind. As McCummings ran from the scene of the crime, the policeman shot him. McCummings sued and has won $4.3 million from a New York court. The judgment has twice been upheld on appeal. If you wonder why Rush Limbaugh is riding around in a limousine, it is because he can inflame his listeners with accounts of this kind of liberal stupidity. . . .

A major thrust of this magazine's 25 years has been forcing liberals to confront what's wrong with liberalism. But we are liberals ourselves. For example, as Nicholas Lemann points out in this issue, we criticize government not because we don't think it can work but because we want to show why it isn't working and how it can be made to work. We have similar feelings about Bill and Hillary Clinton. We may often times seem scathing in our criticism, but we want them to succeed and hope that by pointing out where they are going wrong we can help them do right. . . .

—*Charles Peters*

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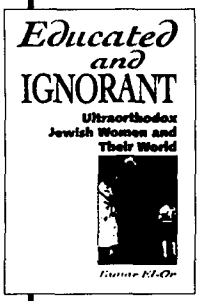

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The Media's Rush to Judgment

Quick, facile pronouncements on Clinton, the Gulf War, and Japan dramatize a dangerous new tendency: a McLaughlinized press would rather jump to conclusions than work to get it right

BY JAMES FALLOWS

When I started working for this magazine nearly 22 years ago, Richard Nixon was about to win re-election over George McGovern in the face of mounting evidence about Watergate. One of the first stories I did for the magazine, which like so many other stories reflected the heavily guiding hand of our editor-in-chief, Charles Peters, blamed *The Washington Post* and its Woodward-and-Bernstein team for not pushing the story harder while it could still have made a difference at the polls. Surely (I asserted) the paper could see that the trail of incriminating facts was leading straight toward Nixon himself. So why did the stories taper off and the paper seem so timid in the month before the election? If the *Post* was willing to go for Nixon's jugular, why did it wait until he'd been returned to office before doing so?

Ah, to have such problems today. Some residents of Oregon might still sympathize with my old complaint about the *Post's* hesitancy. If the *Post* itself, along with the *Oregonian*, had pushed harder with stories about Bob Packwood in the month before the 1992 election, Packwood might have been removed from the Senate quickly and cleanly. But these Oregonians would be in the minority. For every case in which today's press errs by being over-cautious, as in the Packwood episode, there are dozens of cases of the reverse—of reporters and commentators reaching sweeping conclusions for which they cannot possibly have proof. The result is to aggravate the cynicism and short attention span that characterize today's political culture. We read about one world-threatening peril this week, a completely different one next week—and pretty soon we are numb to all of them. Here are three examples of what I'm talking about:

- Four months after Bill Clinton's inauguration, the verdicts were in: He had failed dis-

James Fallows, an editor of The Washington Monthly *from 1972 to 1974, is Washington editor of* The Atlantic Monthly.

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astrously as a leader and his administration was for all practical purposes at an end. In early June, *Time* published its cover story on "The Incredible Shrinking Presidency," and *Newsweek*'s cover showed a picture of Clinton with the caption, "What's Wrong?" *The Washington Post* ran a front page story presenting Clinton as a case study of what it means to use up your "political capital." A *New York Times* editorial asked "Can the Democrats Govern?" and a *Times* columnist wrote, "Four months into a new presidency, people who voted for it are wondering if it can be saved." The weekend talk shows rang with *schadenfreude*-edged dissections of "another failed presidency." Even David Broder, usually the soul of sobriety, weighed in with a column calling Clinton's performance a "calamity that reached beyond our borders." This column ended, "That this is happening to a man who will remain as president for the next 43 months is an international disaster."

Comeback Kids

Whoa! No one knows just how strong or weak Bill Clinton will look by the end of his administration, or even what emergencies may have arisen by the time this magazine comes out. But that is exactly the point. *No one could possibly know*, four months into a president's first term, how things were going to turn out in the long run. With the possible exception of William Henry Harrison, who caught pneumonia on Inauguration Day and died a month later, no president has made mistakes in his first four months in office that proved to be the fatal and decisive errors of his presidency. Ronald Reagan and Franklin Roosevelt got off to strong legislative starts in their first years in office. John Kennedy, by enduring and learning from the disaster at the Bay of Pigs, became much more sophisticated about foreign policy during his first year. But most of the events that lead us to classify presidents as successes or failures occurred well into their terms. Jimmy Carter's main success, the Camp David peace agreement, took place near the end of his second year in office. His most obvious failures, involving the Iranian hostages and the Soviets in Afghanistan, occurred in his final year. George Bush triumphed in leading the Desert Storm coalition during the second half of his term. He reneged on his "no new taxes" pledge in his second year and vomited on Kiichi Miyazawa in his last year.

In short, however we ultimately feel about Bill Clinton, it will be different from the way we felt four months into his term—because that has always been the case with presidents. The very pundits who had been pronouncing Clinton dead in June proved this point in the following two months, with the predictable raft of stories about the president's miraculous "comeback." He demonstrated his legislative skill by getting his budget passed; he demonstrated determination by drawing a line in the sand about NAFTA; he demonstrated his charm on a visit to Japan; and he demonstrated that he took established Washington seriously by hiring David Gergen. Six months into his presidency, Bill Clinton was a success again.

The most significant aspect of these "comeback" stories is that, by the logic of the earlier "failure" stories, a comeback should have been impossible. If Clinton in his first four months had "used up" his political capital, if his administration was an "international disaster," if his errors were "fatal"—the term used repeatedly on talk shows—then by definition he could not have recovered. If reporters really believed these things, then they'd have no good reason to keep covering Clinton: He was doomed. But of course the reporters didn't believe the things they were saying. They had seen enough politics and knew enough history to realize that nothing could be settled by the fourth month. Nonetheless, something in the climate of modern journalism made them feel either pressured or entitled to exaggerate.

➤ In the build-up to the war against Iraq three years ago, some people said that Ameri-

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can forces would be slaughtered and others said it would be an easy win. The optimists turned out to be right. People like me, who said that the war could go on for months, were proven wrong. I'm happy to have been wrong about this, and I still believe that when it comes to military commitments the risks of mistaken pessimism are smaller than the risks of mistaken optimism. (Ask Robert McNamara.)

Yet barely three days into the war, the pundit class had leapt beyond the immediate finding—that American forces would rout the Iraqis in a hurry, with little damage to themselves—to the more grandiose conclusion that every bit of equipment in the U.S. arsenal had worked miraculously well. The Patriot missiles were shooting down every Iraqi Scud. The smart bombs were flying in the mail slots and down the exhaust fans of Iraqi military installations, meanwhile sparing innocent civilians. Hah! The joke was on all the people who had said that the American arsenal was full of high-tech turkeys that would fail when put to the test. "When the Patriot downed nine missiles out of a volley of ten over Saudi Arabia late Sunday, it knocked down more than Scuds," a reporter for *The Los Angeles Times* wrote one week into the war. "It overwhelmed the doubts of even those who had called last week's single-shot success beginner's luck." On the talk shows Republicans demanded apologies from those who had criticized the Reagan defense build-up.

Just Desserts

I had a stake in this argument, since I had written in the early 1980s about the risks of relying on very costly, highly complex weapons that worked much better in the laboratory than in the dirty, confusing circumstances of real war. This might seem to be another case in which people like me should be happy to be proven wrong—except that the seeming success of the first few days of combat did not prove us wrong. Within months, it became clear that the initial "Everything worked!" euphoria was ill-founded. At a congressional hearing three months after the fighting, two authorities who usually agree on very little about weapons design—William Perry, generally seen as an advocate of high-tech weaponry, and Pierre Sprey, who had for years made the case for less-complex weapons—agreed that the Patriot had not performed as advertised. Sprey said that, according to Israeli intelligence, Patriots had scored a mid-air hit on only one incoming Scud—not all of them, as TV viewers would have assumed, or 24 of them, or nine out of ten, as had been reported during the war. Perry said (according to David Evans of the *Chicago Tribune*) that the Patriot simply "is not effective" against battlefield missiles like the Scud. One Scud had fallen on a U.S. barracks in Dharan, causing America's major casualties in Desert Storm. During the fighting Pentagon officials said that Patriots had not fired at this Scud because the air-defense system assumed that it had already broken up in flight. Within six months of the fighting it emerged that the Patriot's guidance software had simply failed to detect and lock onto the missile. The laser-guided "smart bombs" shown on the news clips seemed to have hit their targets without fail. In fact, Congressmen were told at the Perry-Sprey hearing, it had taken 72 "smart bomb" sorties to destroy one bridge.

In retrospect, the most accurate assessment of complex weaponry during the fighting was that of retired Admiral Eugene Carroll, of the Center for Defense Information, who said on "Crossfire":

> We're nine days into a war. All we know about this war sitting here right now is what we've been told through the filter in Riyadh and the filter in the Pentagon. Certainly we've seen bombs hit targets and collapse buildings. We haven't seen bombs that missed targets, but I'll guarantee you some have. We haven't received reports on how these systems are holding up. Are they operationally ready in sufficient numbers? The verdict is not in on technology although there are some remarkable performances out there.

Carroll is usually identified as an "advocate," since the Center for Defense Information generally recommends smaller defense budgets. Yet his "advocate's" point was exact-

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ly the one most journalists should have been making—that the evidence was not in, that it was a mistake to accept initial battlefield reports at face value, that there would be time to decide what worked and what didn't when the smoke had cleared. But few journalists and virtually no pundits could be bothered with such boring niceties. The talk show verdict was: Technology, Yes. Doubters (and Iraqis, and Scuds), No. Next Topic!

During the Gulf War journalists should have known not to accept initial battlefield reports at face value. But few reporters and virtually no pundits could be bothered with such boring niceties. The talk show verdict was: Technology, Yes. Doubters (and Iraqis and Scuds), No. Next Topic!

Late last year, American punditry discovered that the Japanese economy was doomed, much as the Clinton administration had been a few months before. During 1993 the Japanese economy contracted slightly, rather than continuing its decades-long record of steady growth. The Tokyo stock exchange plunged to levels at least 60 percent below its peak from the late 1980s; American companies made inroads against the Japanese in the car, semiconductor, and computer markets. After decades of smug boasting about their "no layoffs" policy, big Japanese firms began talking about having too many people for the work at hand.

From this evidence two conclusions might be drawn. One is that something fundamental about the Japanese economy really had changed. For the previous 125 years, since the Meiji Restoration of 1868 began a massive effort to catch up with the industrialized West, Japan's economy had seemed capable of moving only one way: forward. The only serious setback in that period had of course come in the decade before and during World War II, which led the country to disaster. With that exception, Japan had always advanced, and had generally done so faster than outsiders anticipated. But any system can reach limits, and perhaps that is what had happened to Japan in 1993. American competitors may have grown sharper, after their own difficulties in the 1980s. Japanese consumers and oppressed salarymen may at last have had enough. Ten years from now it may be clear that the production-at-any-price system came to an end in Japan in the early 1990s, just as the military-strength-at-any-price system collapsed in the Soviet Union in the late 1980s.

But there is another possibility. Ten years from now, it may be clear that Japan's "crisis" of the early 1990s, rather than representing a fundamental change, was actually like other "crises" in its economic history. In 1972 the Japanese economy was shaken to its foundations by the rise of OPEC and the sudden skyrocketing of oil prices. Japan, which produces virtually no petroleum of its own, feared that it would literally be left to freeze; at a minimum its products would be priced out of world export markets. Yet within a decade, the oil shocks seemed, if anything, to have left Japan's economy stronger. By radically reducing its energy use and shifting to less energy-intensive industries, Japan was better positioned than the United States or Western Europe to deal with supply disruptions in the future. (This is why the Japanese government was so unenthusiastic about Operation Desert Storm. So what if the Iraqis controlled Kuwait's oil supply? Japan didn't need the oil as badly as the Americans did.)

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In 1986, the Japanese economy was shaken nearly as badly by the yen's sudden doubling in value against the U.S. dollar as it had been by the earlier oil shocks. Economists had been saying for years that an undervalued yen gave Japanese exporters a crucial advantage; within months that advantage was stripped away. Western economists were unanimous in saying that Japan's export surge was at an end. Who would buy the Sonys and Toyotas when their price doubled?

Half a dozen years later, it was clear that *endaka*—"high yen"—had left Japan's industries, including its exporters, stronger than ever before. They could acquire assets around the world at bargain prices with their newly powerful currency. They shifted low-wage work to low-wage countries, and expanded high-wage jobs in Japanese factories. The government worked with banks and industries to coordinate a mammoth investment program, so that industries could stay competitive as the yen went up. The Westerners who wrote about the "hollowing out" of industrial Japan in 1986 turned out to be wrong.

Industrial Strengths

Maybe this new "crisis" of the Japanese economy really is different, and maybe this time the Japanese business system will not be able to respond. But at the moment no one can be sure of that. We can be sure of two things: first, that Westerners have repeatedly been wrong before in counting Japan out, and second, that the Japanese economy retains tremendous strengths.

The savings rate in Japan is still at least three times higher than America's. This is a nuisance in the short term, since it makes it harder for Japanese consumers to spend their way out of a recession. It is a godsend in the long term, since it gives the country's industries more money to invest. The Japanese central government usually operates with a balanced budget or a budget surplus, in contrast to America's gigantic deficits. Again in the short run this depresses spending but in the long run it gives the country great maneuvering room. (How different American politics would be now if we could approach health care, education, environmental problems, and scientific research with a "money is no object" attitude.) For the next decade the fastest-growing markets in the world will probably be in Southeast Asia and China. Japanese manufacturers enjoy near-monopoly positions in many of these markets. Despite the "collapse" of Japan's economy, unemployment is lower there than it has been in America for many decades and no major company has announced significant layoffs. Despite the huge numbers of bad debts on the books of Japanese banks, no major bank has been allowed to fail. (Instead, the government acts as mid-wife for mergers in which stronger banks absorb the weak.)

No one in America, and probably no one in Japan, can prove how this combination of strengths and vulnerabilities will balance out for Japan over the next decade. But that hasn't stopped American punditry. Late last year the talk-show consensus was that the Japanese model had been conclusively proven a failure. My old friend Robert Samuelson, writing in *Newsweek* in December, offered three pieces of evidence to show that the Japanese miracle was over: a continued decline in department store sales, one-day furloughs for the Mazda Motors work force, and a comment from Japanese industrialists that they "may have to start laying people off" if the economy didn't rebound. Within a week of his column's appearance, Xerox announced that it would cut its permanent work force by 10,000, and Boeing said it might lay off 3,000 people. For years, Samuelson said, Japan's economy enjoyed "special advantages"—an undervalued yen, sleepy competition in the United States, an ability to copy technology others had pioneered. "All these favorable conditions are now vanishing," he said. Well, maybe—but we've heard similar conclusions before, and so far they've always been wrong.

About a month before Samuelson's column appeared, *The New York Times* publicized a study rebutting the impression that American industries had fallen behind Japan's in productivity. (The headline: "Why the U.S. Is Indeed Productive.") The study, which had been conducted by the consulting firm McKinsey and Company, concluded that Japanese indus-

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tries, taken as a whole, were only 79 percent as productive as American industries. Yoo-Ess-Ay! Yoo-Ess-Ay! Yet the details of the study left a quite different impression from the upbeat headline. The industries in which America was more productive than Japan were: computers; soaps and detergents; beer; and foods. The industries in which Japan was more productive: automobiles; auto parts; metal-working; steel; and consumer electronics.

"The evidence that we found, for the first time, is that the more open you are, the more productive you become," said a McKinsey official whom Sylvia Nasar of the *Times* quoted. In fact McKinsey's list would seem to prove just the reverse. The areas of America's strengths have been, in different ways and at different times, among its most protected industries. The computer industry got going largely on the strength of government contracts; the beer and food industries are both subject to notorious protectionist provisions. (America's trade fights with Canada often involve wood and beer.) Every industry on Japan's list of strengths has for decades been affected by formal and informal trade restraints. This doesn't prove that America should adopt a similar policy, and it doesn't prove that Japan's economy will continue to grow. But it does suggest that it's too early to print stories with an "America has won!" tone.

What is going on in the Japan case is partly a struggle of ideologies. By the tenets of post-World War II American economics, the Japanese economy can't really have worked. Our principles tell us that protectionism and government regulation ultimately backfire. Japan has obviously been regulated and protectionist, so anyone with an American economics training is on the lookout for signs that Japan has finally failed. Moreover, having heard for years about the annoyingly hard-working and omni-competent Japanese, many Americans are relieved and delighted that Japan can have problems, too.

In the "McLaughlin Group" era, Washington journalism celebrates positions, opinions, spin, and "takes" on an issue. In the culture of "Crossfire" and McLaughlin, you're all For an issue or you're all Against it. It is weak and wet to say, "No one knows."

Yet what is going on in all these cases is something broader: It is the clinching evidence that John McLaughlin has supplanted Woodward and Bernstein as the symbol of Washington journalism. The Woodward and Bernstein era, for all its excesses, at least celebrated journalists for their reportorial effort. In the "McLaughlin Group" era, Washington journalism celebrates positions, opinions, spin, and "takes" on an issue. In the culture of "Crossfire" and McLaughlin, you're all For an issue or you're all Against it. It is weak and wet to say, "No one knows."

Yet no one knew, in June of 1993, how Bill Clinton would ultimately fare as president. No one knew, after a week of fighting in the Persian Gulf, what the after-action reports would show about U.S. weapons. No one knows today whether and how Japan will respond to its current distress. Worst of all, no one knows how long we will have to wait until the journalistic culture changes again. □

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What Will Rogers Could Teach the Age of Limbaugh

A voice of selflessness and consensus might sound out of place today, but without one, nothing we need to do will get done

BY JON MEACHAM

No money, no banks, no work, no nothing, but they know they got a man in there who is wise to Congress, wise to our big bankers, and wise to our so-called big men. The whole country is with him. Even if what he does is wrong, they are with him. Just so he does something. If he burned down the Capitol, we would cheer and say, 'Well, at least we got a fire started somehow.'

—Will Rogers on FDR's inauguration, 1933

This no-nonsense but generous welcome to the White House was exactly what Franklin Roosevelt needed. After all, things in the country could hardly have been worse. When a writer for the *Saturday Evening Post* asked John Maynard Keynes if there had ever been anything like the Depression before, he replied, "Yes. It was called the Dark Ages, and it lasted four hundred years."

Of all that was said at the opening of the Roosevelt administration, it's striking that the most sensible words came not from a Brain Truster but from Rogers—a former cowboy rope twirler, star of the *Ziegfeld Follies*, and movie actor. Striking, but not surprising: In the early thirties, Rogers was the nation's most influential popular political and cultural voice, reaching 40 million Americans with his columns and radio commentaries. With wit and common sense, Rogers emphasized pulling together and extending a generous hand to those down on their luck. "These people that you are asked to aid, they are not asking for charity, they are naturally asking for a job. But if you can't give them a job, why the next best thing you can do is see that they have food and the necessities of life," Rogers said in a 1931 appeal for the unemployed, who then numbered 25 percent of the population. "You know, not a one of us has anything that these people that are without now haven't contributed to what we've got. There is not an unemployed man in the country that hasn't contributed to the wealth of every millionaire in America."

Delivered without sentimentality, this kind of message moved a country deeply skeptical that familiar institutions could work—a world not unlike our own. Americans then were as bewildered by the failure of banks, farms, and the market as we are now by schools, health care, and government

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itself. What separates us from them is that they pulled themselves out of their ditch and we remain stuck in ours, routinely registering despair with the state of the union. Sixty percent of Americans regularly tell pollsters the country is "on the wrong track."

This is not because there were better ideas or better policies in the past. There are plenty of sound programs around now on health care, entitlements, and education. Yet none seems likely to come about in the current political climate because we are missing what made America work from the thirties to the sixties: a willingness to concede the other side's point and to give up special advantages in order to advance a common good. Without that, all the reforms in the world will come to nothing.

Will Rogers, circa 1930

Will Rogers Memorial and Birthplace

If Rogers' successor as the country's most influential pop political voice—Rush Limbaugh—is any indication, that is exactly the dismal situation Americans now face. Limbaugh's reach is similar to Rogers': a weekly radio audience of 20 million, a nightly television show available to 99.82 percent of the nation's viewing households, and 400,000 subscribers to his monthly newsletter. But Limbaugh's tone and message is a world away from Rogers'—and a world away from generosity of spirit. Limbaugh, for example, greeted the Clinton inauguration on his TV show with an "America Held Hostage" graphic: "We are all imprisoned to the liberal idealism of the hippyish sixties, ladies and gentlemen," Limbaugh warned. "And every night we're going to remind you of it on this show."

The distinction is more than partisan: Rogers stuck up for the little guy and so tended to identify with Democrats, but he hit FDR and his party when they deserved hitting. The signal difference between Rogers and Limbaugh—and between the thirties and the nineties—is one of spirit. Rogers' voice was generous—shrewd, funny, and encouraging. Limbaugh's is childishly ironic—shrewd and funny, to be sure, but uninterested in making anybody do anything except listen to Rush Limbaugh. One was about coming together, the other is about coming apart. Consider:

● A year before the 1932 election, Rogers, who had been hard on politically conservative bankers, speculators, and the Harding-Coolidge administrations, said this of Hoover: "I know that [unemployment] is very dear to Mr. Hoover's heart and know that he would rather see the problem of unemployment solved than all the other problems he's got before him combined. . . He's had a very tough, uphill fight, and this will make him feel good. He's a very human man."

➤ After Clinton opened his Inaugural Address with the phrase "My fellow citizens. . . " Limbaugh ranted: "Wait a minute. Wait a minute. . . 'My fellow citizens'? Whatever happened to 'My fellow Americans'? You think he didn't say Americans by accident? That was on purpose, folks. I guarantee you that's exactly what this administration is all about—their stupid symbolism. You know what the problem with 'Americans' is? Americans is not inclusive enough. No, no, it does not include everybody. It alienates people out there on the fringes whose pain we are all try-

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ing to feel. There are a lot of people who aren't proud to be Americans: Native Americans, the people who don't like you to call them Redskins and Braves and all that. This is purposeful. . . He can't just say, 'My fellow Americans.'"

Why is the same nation that idolized Rogers now idolizing Limbaugh? One reason is that we are *not* the same nation anymore. Rogers lived in a time when, because the middle and working classes were basically united, he was able to urge selflessness on people inclined to be generous. By the sixties, however, that sense of community had frayed. Increasing numbers of upper income parents pulled their children out of public schools, and the draft, which mixed millions of middle class and working class men, ended in 1973. Politically, we have separated as well: As Jonathan Rauch notes in his book *Demosclerosis*, Americans have subdivided into lobbies at an astounding pace since 1956. That year, there were 5,000 associations in Washington; by 1990, there were 20,000. Seventy percent of Americans belong to at least one association; 25 percent belong to four or more. (It's not merely coincidental that Washington, which boasted only three fancy restaurants in the fifties and sixties—Rive Gauche, La Salle du Bois, and the Jockey Club—had a rash of upscale openings in the seventies to meet the demand for lobbyist expense-account meals.) Limbaugh comes out of a selfish world and urges self-absorption on the self-absorbed. In short, FDR could appeal to a nation that had not yet organized itself into chain-link fence manufacturers and mohair farmers; Clinton cannot.

Yet Roosevelt and his successors up to Johnson were not operating in a pastoral world of public selflessness. They too faced a country as potentially susceptible to the politics of self-interest—the politics of Limbaugh—as we are now. But Americans generally overcame their worst tendencies through the New Deal, the Fair Deal, the Eisenhower years, the New Frontier, and much of the Great Society. These were days of rapidly expanding government (from Social Security to Medicare to the Tennessee Valley Authority) with rapidly obvious results (Social Security and Medicare virtually ended poverty among the elderly; TVA brought power to a huge part of the country). The building of the interstate highways and higher top tax rates on the rich (Truman, Eisenhower, and Kennedy, 91 percent; Johnson, 77 percent) were other signs of collective national action, made possible by a national willingness to contribute.

Real reform always means sacrifice—whether it's a well off Social Security recipient taking a means test or a farmer giving up his crop subsidy. Americans were once unselfish enough to make just those kinds of sacrifices. That's what FDR counted on, and he was rewarded with sweeping re-election in 1936. All of which shows that while our problem today—a politics of self-interest—is difficult to solve, it is soluble because we have tilted the margin toward fair play before in difficult times.

A Will to Help

First, a look back. In the mid-thirties, the *New York Sun* wrote, "Will Rogers. . . has a curious national quality. He gives the impression that the country is filled with such sages, wise with years, young in humor and love of life, shrewd yet gentle. He is what Americans think other Americans are like."

Born just 14 years after Appomattox, Rogers traveled by horseback in Oklahoma as a boy and would die in an airplane crash in Alaska in 1935. In the intervening years, American life was rapidly moving from agrarianism to manufacturing. Rogers moved with the times, mastering one medium after another: Wild West shows, vaudeville, radio, newspaper columns, and movies. In the early thirties, Rogers was the most widely read columnist and the number-one box office draw in the nation—a level of popularity in different arenas almost unimaginable today. So it's telling that the public responded so enthusiastically to a man whose public persona resembled that of another figure associated with common sense and the frontier: Huck Finn. Like Huck, Rogers appealed to the best things in the American character—fair play and a throwing off of old class divisions—with a cold eye for hypocrisy and human folly. And this message resonated with people, puzzled as they were by a changing economy and changing times, who took from Rogers the lesson that the decent thing to do was sympathize with those who most needed help.

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"You can never have another war in this country unless Will Rogers is for it," an unnamed "Washington statesman" told the popular *American Magazine* in 1930. When newspapers and magazines began calling, only half-jokingly, for a Rogers presidential campaign in 1932, it worried Roosevelt enough that he wrote Rogers, "Don't forget you are a Democrat by birth, training, and tough experience, and I know you won't get mixed up in any fool movement to make the good old Donkey chase his own tail and give the Elephant a chance to win the race." While FDR was right that Rogers' sympathies were basically with the Democrats, his politics, as Ben Yagoda defines them in a landmark 1993 Rogers biography, were more complicated than that:

> His main impulse was a broad, neo-Jeffersonian populism tempered by an across-the-board skepticism. He had a general and instinctive distrust of bankers, big business, and Wall Street. . . . Pro-income tax and anti-tariff, he doggedly stuck up for the farmers, whom he (correctly) saw as getting the blunt end of Republican economic policies of the 1920s. He felt that consumer buying on credit and stock-market speculation, both of which reached unprecedented proportions by the end of the decade, were something close to an evil, and he (correctly) felt they would end in disaster. But unlike many populists, Will was no proselytizer.

Rogers wasn't radical in any way. He dismissed Prohibition ("Talking about Prohibition is like whittling used to be—it passes the time but don't get you nowhere") and put no stock in crusaders from William Jennings Bryan to Huey Long to Woodrow Wilson.

Free of partisan baggage, Rogers conceded good points all around: As occasion demanded, he would praise Calvin Coolidge or Al Smith, Hoover or Robert LaFollette. "Suddenly, appearing to be a good sport, a regular guy, had become an important political consideration," writes Yagoda. Rogers' sympathy for right and left pressed the political debate forward and engaged established interests—from Wall Street speculators to New Deal bureaucrats—not just vaguely defined liberal or conservative ones.

Limbaugh epitomizes a terrible fact about American life today: Extremism, ego, and irony sell. "Remember this above all else," Limbaugh says, "my success is not determined by who wins elections, my success is determined by how many listeners I have." In other words, as long as he gets his, that's fine.

Rogers, for example, ebulliently opened the Roosevelt era (remember, after kindly addressing Hoover, who was sometimes threatened with rioters during the '32 campaign), writing in the First Hundred Days, "[Roosevelt] swallowed our depression. He has inhaled fear and exhaled confidence." Two years later, however, Rogers hit both his friend in the White House and big business over the misadministration of FDR's National Recovery Administration (the arm of the New Deal intended to shorten the work week, establish a minimum wage, and let workers organize). Different industries were successfully lobbying for exemptions from the law. "The NRA looked like a good bet at the time, but part of it, in fact maybe over half of it, has proven to be nonpractical. It had all the right ideas but we are still just too selfish to see that exactly the right thing is done for the good of everybody." If we are really all in this together, Rogers said, then we ought to act like it:

> Some industry can't come in and say, 'Ours is a special and unique business. You can't judge it by the others.' Well no committee come into Jerusalem looking for Moses and saying

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'Ours is a special business.' Moses just went up on the mountain with a letter of credit and some instructions from the Lord, and He just wrote 'em out, and they applied to the steel men, the oil men, the bankers, the farmers, and even the United States Chamber of Commerce. And he said, 'Here they are, Brothers, you can take 'em and live by 'em, or else.'

Instead, Rogers pointed out, industries went to Washington and came back with "24 truckloads" worth of special interest exemptions. The overarching message? Not mindless government-bashing. Rogers never questions the need for action. He was criticizing an institution in a tone—friendly but sharp—that strongly implied the problem ought to be fixed, not just jawed about. Because Rogers talked like this, expressing and reinforcing the basic spirit of the times, it did have an effect. Middle and working class people whose inclination might otherwise have been to turn cynical about Roosevelt gave the president a break in those rocky early days—eventually sending FDR back to the White House in 1936 carrying every state except Maine and Vermont.

The Bum's Rush

Every day at noon, Eastern Time, on 638 radio stations and again late at night on television, a slightly overweight man in flowered ties intones:

> Greetings, listeners across the fruited plain, this is Rush Limbaugh, the most dangerous man in America, serving humanity simply by opening my mouth, destined for my own wing in the Museum of Broadcasting, executing everything I do flawlessly with zero mistakes, doing this show with half my brain tied behind my back just to make it fair because I have talent on loan from. . . God. Rush Limbaugh. A man. A legend. A way of life.

Well. The contrast in tone from Rogers—whose signature opening was the self-effacing "All I know is what I read in the papers"—couldn't be greater. Limbaugh's self-promotion, consciously purveyed and heavy with irony, is a prelude to a message of selfishness, the worst element of an otherwise engaging conservatism.

For Limbaugh, on points of policy, is not entirely as antediluvian as his critics make him out to be. Leaving aside its uncritical adoration of Ronald Reagan, Limbaugh's creed (laid out in two books modestly titled *The Way Things Ought To Be* and *See, I Told You So*) can, at times, get at quite sensible points. For instance:

➤ His critique of government is hardly Know-Nothing: "Sure, I use the public streets and the post office, and if I get a disease someday I may benefit from the government's medical research. . . But the streets cost twice as much as they should and always seem to have potholes. The mail service is twice as slow as it should be. With some diseases the Food and Drug Administration keeps as many lifesaving drugs off the market as it approves."

➤ On the Washington press corps: "The media have covered up Congress' sins for a long time. Many journalists are lazy and they live off snacks of information passed out by congressional staffers. They love prepackaged stories they don't have to work at uncovering themselves. In return, reporters only rarely bite the congressional hand that feeds them."

It goes on: Basically clear-headed assessments of how homelessness is more the result of mental illness, drinking, and drug abuse than of a lack of affordable housing; of how criminals belong in jail; of how kids should be allowed a moment of silence in public schools.

What separates Limbaugh from others who also understand what's wrong with liberalism is that he refuses to acknowledge that polarized debate isn't very useful for the country. In fact, he epitomizes a terrible fact about American life today: Extremism, ego, and irony sell. "Remember this above all else," Limbaugh says, "my success is not determined by who wins elections, my success is determined by how many listeners I have." In other words, as long as he gets his, that's fine—the same view taken, not entirely coincidentally, by other major contemporary political forces like the American Association of Retired Persons or the National Education Association. Limbaugh is the apotheosis of the politics of ego—he is a one man special interest. He thrives on attention, and the less conciliatory he is, the more attention he gets. It's a reversal of the cycle Rogers was part of: Where Rogers was produced by a culture of selflessness and encour-

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aged it, Limbaugh is produced by a culture of selfishness and makes it worse.

Limbaugh, for example, preaches a small-government message to an audience that zealously protects its slices of the federal pie—Social Security, Medicare, home mortgage interest deductions, veterans' benefits, civil service pensions, what have you—that add up to big government. Nevertheless, Limbaugh raves against government without really acknowledging that the people he's talking *to* are the same people he's talking *about*: Limbaugh's beloved middle class, who are "just plain tired and worn out. They get blamed for everything in this country. They are taxed more than ever. . ." Middle America, put upon by unnamed liberals, is always being asked to pay while the undeserving poor are making off like bandits. "Our inner cities are now collapsing, crime is running rampant, and yet all the money we've poured into those problems hasn't helped." And so on.

Rush Limbaugh: America's one man special interest group.

Even when Clinton does things Limbaugh agrees with, such as calling on black ministers to stop inner-city violence, Limbaugh fails to give the president credit and instead claims credit for the ideas himself. In November, Limbaugh ran a clip of Clinton's impassioned speech to ministers in Memphis in which the president said, "And then there's some changes we're going to have to make from the inside out, or the others won't matter." Limbaugh then cut to himself (of course, on his TV show, he has to cut to himself; there's one camera, trained on Limbaugh, with rows of his books arrayed behind him), exclaiming, "That's what we've been saying all along. . . And it's the government that's led to the problems that we have. And now he, all of a sudden, is coming to the store, and realizing the problem, and he's being praised for it. I just wanted you to see this, because you know they're Johnny-come-latelies on this, my friends. Got to claim victory. You just have to run around and not let them get away with stealing this issue." There is no building of sentiment for actually doing anything. Great for ratings, bad for the country.

That the ratings are so high proves that a lot of us are buying what Limbaugh is selling. By pressing people to worry only about themselves and their own problems—Clinton's stealing *our* ideas; he's after *our* money—Limbaugh reinforces the increasingly self-absorbed world that has made him a star. "I am now enjoying success in my life," Limbaugh says. "That doesn't mean I don't remember what it was like to struggle. . . But it would serve no constructive purpose for me to sit around and wring my hands every day over the disadvantaged, the poor, the homeless, the middle class, and others. That would be the liberal thing to do." When you think about what Rogers used to say to a similarly large audience about the same subjects, you can see how far we have traveled from better days.

What would a Rogers say today? That nobody has a monopoly on virtue or the truth, right or left, and that it's folly to act as if the country's health care, its schools, or its daily life will improve without the willingness to confront uncomfortable truths and to stand aside when it's your stake that stands in the way. That it's a disgrace for 37 million Americans to be without health insurance, for millions more to fear losing coverage, and for reform to be bottled up by those—in-

Simon & Schuster

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surers, hospitals, doctors, and irresponsible patients—who wrecked the system in the first place. That it's a disgrace for public schools to spend so much and fail to educate children, paying more for bureaucrats than for books and teachers. That people who complain about big government and the deficit ought to give up their breaks first. That the poor deserve a hand up—and even public works jobs cost the taxpayer something.

Rereading Rogers, you get the sense that there *is* a similar twang out there today, not from Oklahoma but further south and a little east: from Texarkana's Ross Perot. At first glance, Perot seems to be Rogers' heir in homespun wit: We are cleaning up the barn; Washington is full of alligators in alligator shoes; etc., etc. Rogers was famously generous to drought and Depression victims; Perot did his most humane work in dramatizing the plight of American prisoners of war in Southeast Asia. But Perot built his business processing government contracts by computer, and he was a master at winning special tax breaks from Congress in his business lobbying days.

The great disappointment of Perot's politics in 1992 was that while he talked honestly at first about common sacrifice and offered a tough but fair entitlement-control plan, he quickly shut up about it for fear of alienating voters. He grew content to toss more one-liners around than appeals for national action. And, once Clinton was elected, the Perot egomania that lurked just beneath the surface during the campaign broke out all over and he fell into the Limbaugh trap of criticizing the president without trying to move the country toward a working consensus. Why? Because as polarization increases, so does the audience for polarizers.

What is odd about 1994 is that while most Americans agree things are in a bad way, they register no faith in government—or in themselves—to fix them. But the country did work together once, and it did so against obstacles of selfishness—the rich's hatred of Roosevelt, the sense of lay-that-burden-down immediately after 1945—that we face again today. The country worked when we recognized that while Arcadia was not attainable, the margin could be tilted toward order and fair play—toward a Will Rogers, away from a Rush Limbaugh and a Ross Perot. And that has little to do with policy minutiae and everything to do with how we see ourselves. □

The Washington Monthly

JOURNALISM AWARD

FOR OCTOBER 1993 IS PRESENTED TO

Dean Baquet with Diana B. Henriques

The New York Times

Prowling around a bureaucracy as ostensibly boring as the Department of Agriculture strikes most reporters as being about as much fun as proofing the weekend weather page. But Baquet and Henriques burrowed into two dozen internal government audits and 1,600 pages of internal correspondence to chronicle fraud and bureaucratic arrogance in a three-part series on how Agriculture's trade policies tend to enrich large, multinational agribusiness firms—not enlarge U.S. markets for all farmers, which is what they are supposed to do. In 1986, President Reagan ordered all federal departments to deny contracts to companies that had been suspended or removed from other government business—a straightforward reform intended to get companies that looted one agency out of the federal trough altogether.

Every agency went along, with one big exception: Agriculture. While the Pentagon, for example, moved to cut off business with three dozen dairies—including some industrial giants—convicted of price-fixing and bid-rigging federal contracts to sell milk to schools and military bases, Agriculture expelled only two small, regional dairies. What gives? Agriculture's enduringly cozy relations with its constituencies and a lack of effective congressional or OMB oversight. This is the kind of endemic problem that should prompt voters to demand that Congress and the White House clean house—and soon.

The Monthly Journalism Award is presented each month to the best newspaper, magazine, television, or radio story (or series of stories) on our political system. Nominations for any newspaper, magazine, radio or television station in the country are welcome. The subject can be government in its federal, state, or municipal manifestation. Please send nominations to Monthly Journalism Award, 1611 Connecticut Ave. NW, Washington, D.C. 20009. Two copies of the article or broadcast text should accompany the nomination.

Nominations for stories published or aired in January/February will close March 15. The winner will be announced in the May issue.

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Tidbits & Outrages

CATCH HIS NEW FALL COURSE: INTRODUCTION TO THE OBVIOUS, 101.

A "distinguished professor of management" at St. John's University in New York, John Trinkaus, researches shoppers' compliance with number-of-items limits at supermarket express lanes. "There is some substantial tendency," Trinkaus told *The Los Angeles Times*, "not to play by the rules."

YEAH, AND IF SHE MISSES LUNCH, SHE RAISES PROPERTY TAXES.

When New York City Comptroller Elizabeth Holtzman was asked during a live television interview to sum up her career, she started crying and became so upset she had to leave the room for 20 minutes. When she came back, she told the reporter, "If I don't get my cereal in the morning, I get very emotional."

SURE, BOB, IT MADE ME THINK "GULL WING MERCEDES." AND YOUR CORDUROYS MADE ME THINK "SIX-PIECE GUCCI LUGGAGE SET."

The J. Peterman Company

A vest doesn't come right out and hit you over the head with a club.

But still...vests do have their own private power of suggestion. A suede vest seen under an open jacket makes you seem just a little on the sophisticated side.

People look. They say to themselves: "What is it about this guy... probably has a gull-wing Mercedes that he never even drives."

A man in a vest like this seems at ease. This is nothing new. Vests have always had that power. But whether a vest makes a man become that way or a man who is that way always just naturally wears a vest, is not known.

Color: Cinnamon-Tobacco Brown.

No reason to continue living without one.

Men's sizes: XS, S, M, L, XL. (Unisex.)

Price: $137.

"SENATOR MCCONNELL, WHICH ISSUE IS YOUR HIGHEST PRIORITY—HEALTH CARE, THE DEFICIT, OR CAMPAIGN FINANCE REFORM?"

Senator Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, upset that the University of Louisville will apparently be shut out of the New Year's Day bowl games, has asked the Justice Department to investigate whether a college football bowl coalition violates anti-trust laws.

—Scott Shuger

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A House Divided

Why asking Congress to perform two often contradictory jobs—legislating and overseeing—is asking for trouble

BY DAVID SEGAL

There were newspaper accounts of cost overruns, murmurings of design defects, and rumors of opposition within the Pentagon. In January of 1989, the military's new cargo transport plane, McDonnell Douglas' C-17, had all the symptoms of a "troubled" program, and the Defense Subcommittee of the House Appropriations committee was going to do something about it. Swinging into investigative mode, it assembled a handful of its members, summoned some military brass, alerted the media and held . . . an infomercial.

Sure, the event was billed as a "Congressional hearing," but that phrase evokes a semi-circle of unamused lawmakers bearing down on glum, fifth-taking witnesses with lawyers at their side. This event looked more like one of those scripted half-hour cable programs designed to sell rechargeable hand blenders. All the elements were there: a genial host (Congressman Norm Dicks) helping an animated huckster (General Duane H. Cassidy) sell us a product (the C-17) that we don't really need. And the sales pitch covered all the bases:

This thing really does the job!

> Rep. Dicks: Isn't the C-17 much more capable of of landing and taking off?
> General Cassidy: It's performance is much better. . . . It give us the flexibility inherent to being able to go more places.

It's loaded with great features!

> Rep. Dicks: The C-17 gives you that intratheatre capability.
> General Cassidy: We have to be able to move and react to the fighting situation. The C-17 gives you that in the capability for the theater movement and you can't predict where that is going to be.

The competition doesn't compare!

> Rep. Dicks: One of the major points that I think needs to be pointed out is the number of fields in

Reaseach assistance for this article was provided by Alan Greenblatt, Halle Shilling, and Adam Marcus.

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Europe that you can take the C-17 to versus the [Air Force's cargo transport] C-5. I mean it is very substantial.
General Cassidy: It is very significant, a factor of five to one.

The experts love it!

Rep. Dicks: Is there unity behind the C-17?
General Cassidy: This is the only program in DoD that has full service support and all the Commanders in Chief support it.

You've seen it advertised elsewhere for a fortune but we're offering a low, low price!

Rep. Dicks: There seems to be some confusion on the actual cost of the C-17. On January 24th in a *Washington Post* article headed "Hard Times Ahead Over Hardware" called the C-17 a plane that costs an average of $483 million each when spare parts and hangar costs are included.
General Cassidy: The unit fly-away cost of the airplane as we consider it in then-year dollars is less than $125 million a copy.

Of course, had this been a real infomercial, the FTC would have prosecuted Dicks and Cassidy for false advertising. The plane's design was defective, the military had to reduce its performance specifications three times, and its cost soared (each C-17 is now slated to cost $300 million). As all of these facts made it into the press in the months after this hearing, then Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney announced that the military would buy 40 C-17s instead of the originally planned 210. He then fired one general and accepted the resignations of two others in charge of the program. But at that point the military had already pumped billions into the program. As one former Office of the Secretary of Defense analyst put it, "There were always voices in the Pentagon arguing that the C-17 was too expensive and that there were cheaper alternatives, but nobody wanted to hear it."

A congressional hearing would seem an opportune place to listen, but as the House Appropriations' C-17 hearing suggests, lawmakers are

Illustration by Victor Juhasz

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often more interested in rah-rahing programs and agencies than in thoroughly investigating them. Shameless pork politics? In part. If the C-17 gets built, after all, that's jobs and federal dollars for someone's district. If you're a legislator and those dollars are headed to your home district, why ask tough questions? When members feel compelled to bring home the bacon, letting them do the watchdogging is like asking Dead Heads to guard the medicine cabinet—it puts duty at cross purposes with instinct. Lawmakers vie for federal dollars, which can help them keep their own jobs, at the same time that they are supposed to find out when those dollars are being wasted.

But more often Congress' negligence comes from a far less craven impulse—the urge to get along. "There's tremendous pressure for us to not criticize each other," says Rep. Scott Klug, a second term member from Wisconsin. "There's pressure not to kick somebody in the shin that you might have to work with tomorrow." The problem is that when it comes time to push for legislation that is dear to them, legislators need all the friends they can muster. One quick way to lose friends is to perform the sort of tough oversight that ends infusions of dollars to home states and districts. In other words, there's no reason to dig hard even when the dollars are heading for your *colleagues'* constituents—colleagues who later might take a dim view of *your* favorite program, as well-intentioned and essential for the commonweal as it might be. It's telling—and alarming—that Rep. Dicks does not hail from southern California, where the C-17 is made. He's from Washington state, home of Boeing, also a major defense contractor, leading unsympathetic observers to allege that Dicks' ardor for the plane was simply back-scratching for his two Golden State committee partners, gentlemen whom he might need to call on someday to return the favor.

So Congress' poor oversight track record isn't so much a scandal about greed and thievery as it is the inevitable result of asking legislators to both make laws and see them implemented. But the Hill's prevailing ethos of "I'll ignore that if you sign on to this" has a price. It helps explain why Congress fails to stave off not just high profile catastrophes like the S&L collapse, but quieter outrages as well: that one out of five dollars spent by the government goes for overhead; that one third of the $200 million spent by Superfund went to paperwork; that there is a person in government called the "Federal Inspector of the Alaskan Natural Gas Pipeline" earning $115,300 even though no such pipeline exists.

Congress is given plenty of resources to ferret out these kinds of failures. The House and Senate have an elaborate network of 247 committees and subcommittees run by a total of 3,400 staffers to divvy up the work. And these folks aren't idle: In the past 16 years House committees alone have held a total of 54,034 hearings, or roughly 20 each day the chamber was in session. There's also a kennel of accountants and investigators in the General Accounting Office which can be sicked on any subject, not to mention Inspectors General in the agencies themselves whose findings can be used to pursue inquiries.

But the Hill has been so ineffectual with these tools that few people even realize that regularly appraising programs is actually one of Congress' duties. Most legislators are simply wary of asking the tough questions that could make government work. To understand how this wariness affects even courageous members, take a look at what pressures naturally spin out from the committee system and Hill culture.

Unnatural Disasters

To begin with, there's the workload. Consider Ted Kennedy, who is the chairman of four committees and a member of six others. Enough to keep him ricocheting around the chamber, right? But look at what just one of those jobs entails. As chairman of the Labor and Human Resources committee, Kennedy is the Senate's point man for the Department of Health and Human Services, an agency with 127,000 employees, an annual budget of $641 billion, and 250 different national health and welfare programs. Keeping an eye on HHS would take six packs of Jolt Cola and late nights for even the most committed workaholic. Kennedy may be equal to the task, but it's hard to believe he could be without slighting the roughly 220 hearings held last year

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by the nine other committees on which he sits. And the senior lawmaker from Massachusetts isn't unusual. Most senators have the same amount on their plates; House members slightly less.

Then there's the baffling way that the committees divide their work. Most agencies and subjects are scrutinized by a number of committees. In some cases this simply leads to stasis. Tort reform, for instance, is the domain of both the Judiciary committee *and* the Energy and Commerce committee—the former likes the idea, the latter has opposed it and virtually nothing has been done on the subject because of this split opinion. Other times, overlapping jurisdictions lead to fights that ruin legislation. The House Ways and Means committee and the House Education and Labor committee, for instance, both have a hand in student loans, and in the recent tug of war on Clinton's proposed overhaul of the system, a crucial component of it—allowing the IRS to collect payments—got dropped.

The one thing a system like this is unlikely to produce is rigorous oversight. With lines of authority hopelessly splintered and members too overextended to focus on one subject, accountability dwindles to the bare minimum. The standard explanation for this muddled network is that it grew up gradually and has failed to change with the times. But twice in the past two decades Congress has formed—what else?—a committee to rationalize the system, and aside from very slightly reducing the number of members' assignments, neither made lasting changes. The Hill is trying it again this year with something called the Joint Committee on the Organization of Congress, but an advance copy of the group's recommendations shows that improving oversight is virtually its last priority. (Formed in the wake of the House Post Office scandal, its focus is improving Congress' ethical image.)

What gives? The simplest explanation is that the committee system isn't about enhancing government, it is about congressmen broadening what's known on the Hill as "that four letter word, t-u-r-f." "The more committees you sit on, the larger number of jurisdictions you have control over," says Rutgers political scientist Ross Baker, a former staffer on the House Rules committee. "And the more jurisdictions you control, the more resources you can extract on behalf of constituents and interest groups." Being able to extract more resources also means you're better positioned to bargain and push for your own agenda.

That's why the least popular committees—Government Operations in the House and Government Affairs in the Senate—are the two which exclusively perform oversight. Those investigations just might turn up something that could make life unpleasant for past and future allies. There are oversight subcommittees in other committees but their work has been extremely uneven. Today, only a few legislators—most notably John Dingell of the House Oversight and Investigations subcommittee of Energy and Commerce—have earned reputations as strong and thorough overseers. It's far easier, and more comfortable, to make a name as a participant in deals rather than as a spoiler of them.

So the episodic melees for the best slots invariably center on the big dollar outfits. Those tend to be the authorizing committees (which draft legislation and make wish lists of what funding agencies and their programs should receive), and appropriations committees (which study the budgets and write the checks). Last year's crowd of freshmen fought for these choice spots—Public Works and Transportation, Energy and Commerce, Ways and Means, and Appropriations, to name a few—with the kind of elbow-throwing that gets hockey players suspended and fined. In one three way brawl, Rep. Nita Lowey of New York even enlisted the help of a rabbi. Two years ago, Republican Arthur Ravenel threatened to become a Democrat if party elders didn't give him his first choice.

For those not on a high powered committee, next best is getting on as many low-powered committees as possible. This is how the fracturing of agency oversight happens. Smaller committees want as much federal acreage as they can get, so they look for reasons that they should be lords of one part of a given agency.

The results of this are obvious in, for instance, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the people who are supposed to provide relief after earthquakes, floods, and nuclear accidents. No fewer than 16 committees and 23 subcommittees have a hand in the agency: Food and shelter falls to several committees,

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fire prevention to several others, disaster response to several others, and so on. FEMA is a tiny agency, with an annual budget of $983 million, so at first this looks like 100 congressmen in a rugby scrum over an Oreo. But once an earthquake or a flood happens, FEMA hits the emergency appropriations lottery. After Hurricane Andrew swept through Florida, FEMA was suddenly working with $11 billion and a spate of Congressional committees were prepositioned to direct where that money went.

For all that Capitol Hill involvement, FEMA's post-Andrew performance simply—by now, famously—complemented a natural disaster with a manmade one. The clear solution was to make one committee responsible for the whole agency. Yet no restructuring occurred. FEMA's work in the summer's midwest floods got higher marks—they managed to get checks to more people sooner—but the agency still serves nearly two dozen different masters.

Beef Jerks

While most members use committees to enhance the prospects of their own bills and programs, others use their assignments to enhance their prospects for reelection. Most commonly, this means vying for committees important in the state or the home district. Those, for instance, with local high-tech businesses push for the Space, Science, and Technology committee. Those living near port areas try to get on Merchant Marine and Fisheries. What often results is a group of like-minded lawmakers keeping tabs on agencies who, in turn, are keeping tabs on powerful—and generous—industries with PAC dollars that might be crucial to members at election time.

Enough to make you sick? Well, sometimes it does. The Department of Agriculture is supposed to inspect the meat industry, but it's also meant to promote the meat industry. The pro-consumer side of this contradictory mission isn't much enhanced by the House and Senate Agriculture committees, whose members all hail from states like Texas (lots of cattle), or Arkansas (chickens), and Vermont (milk) where agricultural business interests are major players. The chairman of the House subcommittee on Department Operations and Nutrition is Charles Stenholm of Texas, who, according to a Public Citizen book, *They Love to Fly . . . And it Shows*, was given no fewer than 37 plane tickets and $38,000 in honoraria in 1990 by agriculture business interests. His committee colleagues fared nearly as well. The top 13 recipients of agribusiness plane tickets and honoraria—178 of the former, $167,000 in the latter—were on the House and Senate Agriculture committees.

Not surprisingly, these folks haven't done much about the six to eight million cases of foodborne illness reported in the United States each year, some 9,000 of which result in death, and 80 percent of which can be traced to bad meat or chicken. Hearings on this subject generally have a Shirley Temple, look-on-the-bright side tone. This vapid cheerfulness got downright bizarre in the wake of the Jack-in-the-Box hamburger deaths in early 1993. Congress' reigning beef czar, E. (Kika) de la Garza of Texas ($22,000 in honoraria in 1990), breezed into a hearing on the subject primarily to perform a rear guard action on behalf of the industry.

He stated his thesis:

> I just have a couple short questions. One, I have been saying we have the safest food in the world of the major industrialized countries of the world. Am I right or am I wrong?

Then he tried to pin the Jack-in-the-Box incident on Canada:

> Now, recently, one of my colleagues who chairs a subcommittee on another committee made a statement that beef had come through Canada and that this may have caused what happened in Washington State.

Then he restated his thesis:

> My time is up, but I keep saying that we have the safest, we have the best food inspection system in the world.

Then he left. Not surprisingly, there's been no improvement in the USDA's meat inspection system since then.

The price of this kind of coziness is sometimes measured in dollars rather than deaths.

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The S&L bailout, for instance, would have cost significantly less than $300 billion had friendly congressmen, especially those on financial regulatory committees, not exerted pressure on regulators to keep so many ailing thrifts alive. The former committee chairman, Fernand St. Germain, got so chummy with the S&Ls that his first job after losing his seat was lobbying for the thrifts on the Hill.

The ex-Representative from Rhode Island was following a common career path. According to *CongressDaily*, 40 percent of the members turned out by the 1992 elections "have started or joined consulting firms. . . signed on with Washington-based law firms, trade associations, interest groups, and corporate lobbying offices." Which, naturally, provides just another reason to beg off oversight. Why dig hard if you might one day want to work for these people?

Acts of Decency

Members needn't be as rapacious as St. Germain to lose interest in oversight. In fact, what's most insidious about the Hill is that it can change even those with genuine good government fire in their bellies. How? Imagine you're the freshman representative from Michigan, and because you are smart, decent and driven to do good, you draft a bill that will both balance the budget and end hunger in all 50 states. You call it the Decency Act of 1993, and you set about lobbying for it. Meanwhile, you're determined to weed out all the waste, fraud, and abuse you can find as the newest member of the House's Rural Enterprise, Exports and the Environment subcommittee. You pep talk a couple staffers and send them looking for scandals to unearth and millions of tax dollars to save.

Just as the Decency Act is garnering signatures, those staffers come back to you with a couple of real scams, the kind that make you seethe, the kind that you came to Washington to end. You listen to the details with fists clenched and teeth gnashing.

Then you feel a sharp pain in your stomach.

You notice that those incriminating letters and checks your staffers photocopied were headed to some very familiar addresses, namely the home states, maybe even the home districts, of the very folks you've been trying to sign on to your bill. Sure, you've got some solid proof of kickbacks and book-cooking, but going public with it would mean ending programs important to some would-be co-signers. So you face a tough choice. You can either forge ahead with your investigation and fight like hell to save taxpayers some money, or you can look the other way and win acolytes for the Decency Act. By the way, you might not win the investigation fight, and it'll surely make you a pariah in any number of future deals. And anyway, your bill is a wonderful idea and come to think of it, it'd look pretty damn good in that next mailing and, well, you and the missus are beginning to like Washington and. . . .

You get the picture. "I know lots of situations where committee staffers have snooped around and found stuff and their boss showed no interest in it," says Franklin Silbey, formerly an investigator with the Senate's Labor and Human Resources committee. "When you do it right, there's the risk of stepping on someone else's bunions." There's the risk of stepping on someone else's t-u-r-f.

Gregory Rushford learned this the hard way. In 1977, Rushford became a staff investigator with the then second-term senator from Missouri, Tom Eagleton. (Rushford, for the record,

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had been recommended for the job by the editor-in-chief of this magazine, an admirer of Eagleton's.) In a first person account for the *Monthly*, Rushford described his travails when he and his boss searched for a subject to investigate. Just about every subject seemed to encroach on some member Eagleton couldn't afford to anger. Finally, the two decided to look into Food for Peace, an Agency for International Development-administered program that sold food on easy terms to other countries.

Rushford knew that in 1976 a committee headed by Hubert Humphrey found that half of the $50 million in rice, wheat and soybean oil sent by Food for Peace to Bangladesh had been lost to insects, rodents, and mold due to inadequate storage facilities. Rushford quickly learned the cause: Twice as much rice was landing on the docks as the Bangladeshis could safely store. Why? Because a couple of congressmen from rice-producing states had lobbied the White House in 1976 to increase rice exports. One of those states was Arkansas, home to Senator John McClellan, the Chairman of the Defense Appropriations subcommittee. McClellan had recently granted Eagleton membership on this powerful committee, and so Rushford had early on been instructed not to come up with anything that might anger John McClellan. Further nosing around Food for Peace only turned up other ways for Eagleton to annoy his colleagues. Within a few months, Eagleton fired Rushford, explaining that he just wasn't comfortable with him. An administrative assistant explained to Rushford, "I guess you're too much the investigative type."

TV Winners

The press, for its part, doesn't inspire the Eagletons of Congress by covering, and thereby encouraging, rigorous oversight. What creates press interest are the sensational, scam du jour hearings. With uncanny circularity, the ideas for these hearings usually come right from the newspapers which cover them, and generally they are hurrumphing, headline-generating productions that have little to do with discovering why programs aren't working. Also popular is the seasonal hearing. Here the committees win clippings by addressing a topic timely enough to create its own news peg. Take, for example, a recent joint committee hearing on violence in TV video games—just in time for holiday shopping.

The most consistent attention-winning method is drafting new legislation, something most congressman far prefer to checking up on laws that already exist. The House Energy and Commerce committee, for instance, has a hand in something close to 65 percent of all legislation—its purview spans billions in programs ranging from telecommunications to insurance to national energy strategy. With so much at stake it's worrisome to learn that the committee has only 25 staffers, not one of whom is nosing around programs already up and running.

New legislation wins wider glory, and it's also more fun. Getting to the truth about a given program or agency takes energy, determination, and a willingness to wade through documents and detail. Agency heads don't arrive on the Hill and confess their sins. In fact, they tend to wax operatic about a crack squad of bureaucrats delivering unsurpassed efficiency and progress. Sometimes they simply lie, more often they just offer a novel take on the truth. Pentagon procurement officials like to lard testimony with so much inscrutable arcana that legislators either keel from boredom or are flummoxed into silence.

Bearing up under this onslaught and being willing to dig out counter-evidence requires not just time and energy but a group of staffers who know where to look. Dingell and other serious overseers hire veteran investigators with strong backgrounds in special subjects and the instincts of investigative reporters. But too many others are young and new to the subjects they're supposed to keep an eye on. One National Academy of Public Administration study concluded that "High staff turnover and lack of staff experience on Capitol Hill in many of the complex and technical areas exacerbate the difficulties of oversight." In large part that's because congressional jobs are now widely viewed as a launching pad for careers rather than a venue for public service. But members, especially the many committee chairmen, deserve the lion's share of the blame for hiring these people in the first place and then failing to push them to do oversight. "It's up to chairmen to decide how much time, effort, and resources are going to go into investigations and whether or not to take people on,"

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says Rep. Dan Glickman of Kansas. "And few want to because oversight is complex and it isn't sexy."

Congress' myopia, love of publicity, as well as its media-dependence are showcased in scandals like Iran-contra. In June of 1985, the *Miami Herald* ran a story entitled "U.S. Found to Skirt Ban on Aid to Contras" which described a meeting between Oliver North and a contra official. The article caused nary a ripple on the Hill until *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* picked it up. The House Intelligence committee, headed by Lee Hamilton, then lumbered into action by calling in North and simply asking him if the charges were true. The ex-marine firmly denied everything and the issue was dropped. Sending a staffer to Central America might have clarified matters, but Hamilton later said that his committee couldn't afford the trip. Rep. Michael Barnes, then chairman of the Western Hemisphere Subcommittee of House Foreign Affairs, made his own half-hearted investigative stab by writing Robert McFarlane, head of the National Security Council, and demanding to review documents on North's contra contacts. McFarlane knew legislators only too well. He replied that Barnes could see the material but would have to read it himself. Barnes wanted to send an aide, McFarlane stood firm, and again the issue was dropped.

Ultimately, North's penchant for funnelling money to contras was simply a case of the executive branch breaking a law—in this case, the Boland Amendment—which Congress had failed to enforce. The Iran-contra hearings we eventually got were vintage Congress: a media-driven orgy of spleen-venting and speechifying which happened well after anything could be done to prevent the crime.

Plane Speaking

Oversight of the preemptive sort is rare on the Hill, but its ingredients are hardly a mystery, and when it works right it can perform miracles. The paradigm is Harry Truman's investigation of military contracting fraud during World War II. David McCullough's 1992 Truman biography recounts that as the military signed billions in contracts, rumors of profiteering reached the then senator from Missouri, prompting Truman to do something unimaginable in today's Washington: He got in his car and drove. Logging some 10,000 miles by himself, Truman visited a variety of army installations and defense plants, revealing his identity only when asked. In one fort he found, as he put it, "hundreds of men just standing around collecting their pay, doing nothing." Returning to the Capitol, he hired some savvy investigators, organized a set of hearings, and examined crooked and deficient contractors one at a time.

With the country beginning to mobilize, the political mood was not conducive to asking tough questions about how the military was spending money. But Truman knew such questioning couldn't be more timely and he sent his tiny staff directly to factories to learn first hand what was happening. A typical discovery was a rolling mill selling the Navy dangerously inferior grade steel, the kind that cracks when you use it to build ships. The president of that company, J. Lester Perry, had little luck hair-splitting his way through a question and answer session with two members of the committee:

> Perry: I still insist that it [the steel] was not inferior for the end use to which it was put. . .
> Sen. Ferguson: In other words, you are the man who is stating what you think the government should buy?
> Perry: No, sir.
> Sen. Ferguson: Then why don't you live up to the government specifications?
> Perry: We should.
> Sen. Ferguson: Why didn't you?
> Perry: We will.
> Sen. Truman: I'll say you will.

A different tone from the Dicks/Cassidy love-in. By 1943, estimates were that the committee had saved the country $15 billion, a rough guess since Truman's real effect was deterring fraud before it could do damage. As McCullough points out, fear of investigation caused innumerable contractors to clean up their act before their act got examined.

There *are* modern and smaller-scaled analogues to this triumph. Ironically, one of them is the C-17. As the rest of Congress pumped money into the program, two investigators at House Government Operations, a committee which is chaired by Rep. John Conyers, began to study it.

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Both Joe Serincioni and Erik Thorsen were well versed in defense issues—the latter had spent four years in the Pentagon. They knew where to look, what questions to ask, and which documents to demand. When the Pentagon refused to hand over something, Conyers subpoenaed it. When the House Armed Services committee squawked, Conyers ignored it. A parade of witnesses were called to the carpet and third-degreed. Here's Conyers with Colonel Kenneth Tollefson, the Air Force's defense plant representative at McDonnell Douglas, as Tollefson tries to put a happy spin on a 98 page document the company had given the Air Force in 1990. The document listed the C-17's problems:

> Rep. Conyers: Wait a moment. But 98 pages of what?
> Tollefson: Of waivers, deviations or work that would be carried forward at Edwards and completed there.
> Rep Conyers: Some pretty serious?
> Tollefson: Serious, I guess—I am not prepared. . .
> Rep Conyers: We have the documents. Some pretty serious.

Through it all, military officials concealed facts and constantly lied about meetings and money. The dust is still settling on this affair, but the press reports that sparked Cheney to reduce the total C-17 buy and get rid of three generals were the direct result of Thorsen and Serincioni's work.

The Truman and Conyers successes share two critical similarities. First, both men, thanks to the press, made a name for themselves through their oversight work. Truman's hearings, in fact, landed him on the cover of *Time*, made him a national political figure, and helped him become Roosevelt's vice president. But this kind of notoriety is altogether too rare, especially for members conscientious enough to do legislative oversight. The press isn't interested in the yeoman's work of ensuring that programs are functioning as promised, and so the yeomen that do it don't win the fame that their colleagues drafting new legislation or holding splashy hearings can often count on.

In 1979, for instance, the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation noticed that the Federal Aviation Administration was foot-dragging on its promise to install a new mid-air collision traffic alert system. Chairman Howard Cannon lit a fire under the FAA by setting a precise timetable for implementing the system. The agency became, as a National Academy of Public Administration report put it, "vitally concerned" with the project, and significantly "accelerated implementation" of the system. Ideally that sort of quiet congressional intervention would win lawmakers the lasting adoration of America, but Cannon was known only in Washington and his home state of Nevada, and in those places only as a conservative Democrat with a nerdy streak. We need more Howard Cannons, but it's unlikely we'll get many until the press ballyhoos his methods. One of the Hill's favorite committee reform proposals—requiring each committee to publish an oversight agenda—might work like a charm if the media made a point of holding chairmen to it, noting those who failed, and praising those who succeeded.

Secondly, both Truman and Conyers were on committees dedicated exclusively to oversight. Their reputations were staked on whether money was saved and programs were working. Removing the standard, built-in conflict of interest that bedevils other committees might result in the same kind of successes. For as long as a single committee is supposed to both write checks *and* perform oversight, oversight will get slighted. Real reform would require that Congressmen focus on one or two subjects. Then it would strip oversight functions from appropriating and authorizing committees (most of their time is taken up with writing budgets anyway) and establish more committees dedicated solely to oversight. This wouldn't require more committees if you followed Senator Nancy Kassebaum's excellent suggestion of merging appropriations and authorizing committees and using the left over resources to set up more oversight.

These steps will mitigate the problem, not eliminate it. Congressional oversight is one of those messy, tight corners of democracy because it necessarily gives lawmakers two radically different, virtually contradictory roles. The right restructuring and a press that covers what counts would, however, increase our odds of resolving that conflict in a way that benefits everyone, not just narrow special interests and certain home districts. It will go a long way toward producing more Trumans and fewer infomercials. □

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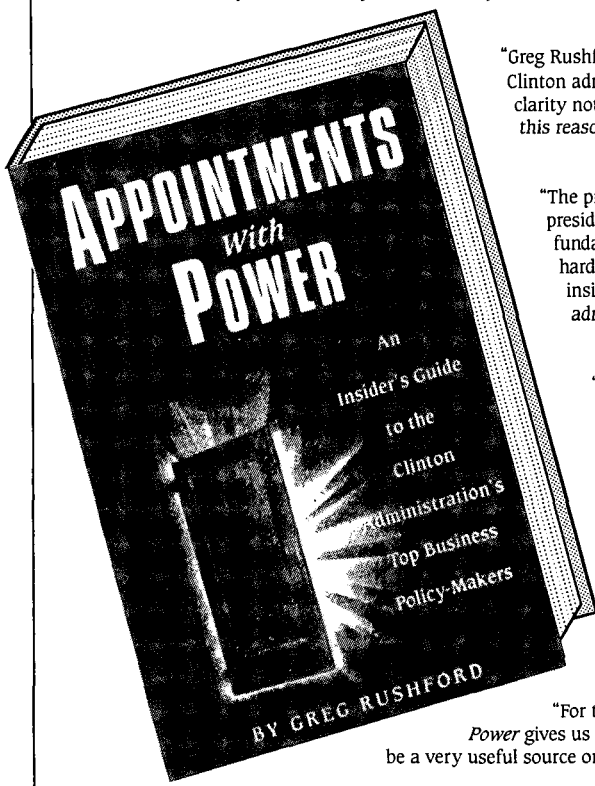

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Government *Can* Work

Where it got us in the past and how to get it back on track

BY NICHOLAS LEMANN

I had my job interview at *The Washington Monthly* in February 1976. Everything went extremely well. In those days most of the life of the magazine took place in three locations, none of which exists anymore: the La Salle Building, a combination cheap residential hotel and office building, where the actual office was; the old Sholl's Colonial Cafeteria, with its constant low hum of people talking to themselves, where the staff hung out; and the Safari Lounge, where Charles Peters, the editor-in-chief, lunched every day amid mounted heads of big game (unless someone else was paying, in which case he went to Jean-Pierre). I moved progressively through the office, Sholl's, and the Safari Lounge without incurring any major damage, and I was beginning to allow myself to luxuriate in a feeling of new membership.

But when I returned to the office with Charlie after lunch, I saw something that sent an icy stab of anxiety through me. While we were out, the latest issue of the magazine had arrived from the printer; on the cover, in giant-sized letters, was the headline CRIMINALS BELONG IN JAIL.

It's surprisingly difficult to reconstruct the standard contents of a young liberal's mind back then. It wasn't exactly that I, and the people at the *Monthly* who had argued heatedly against using that headline on the cover, believed that criminals belonged *out* of jail; it was more that we believed you just couldn't say things like that. Why not? Because the information might fall into the wrong hands. Because you felt that most of the people who believed that criminals belong in jail believed it for the wrong reasons, and you didn't want to be in league with them. Because liberals should present a united front. Because to want criminals in jail was somehow also to want to abandon all attempts to alleviate poverty. It put you on the wrong side.

Much of the early history of this magazine can be understood as a struggle to get liberals to stop blindly clinging to the weak ideas in liberalism. The feeling wasn't so much of convincing people

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Nicholas Lemann, an editor of The Washington Monthly *from 1976 to 1978, is a national correspondent for* The Atlantic Monthly.

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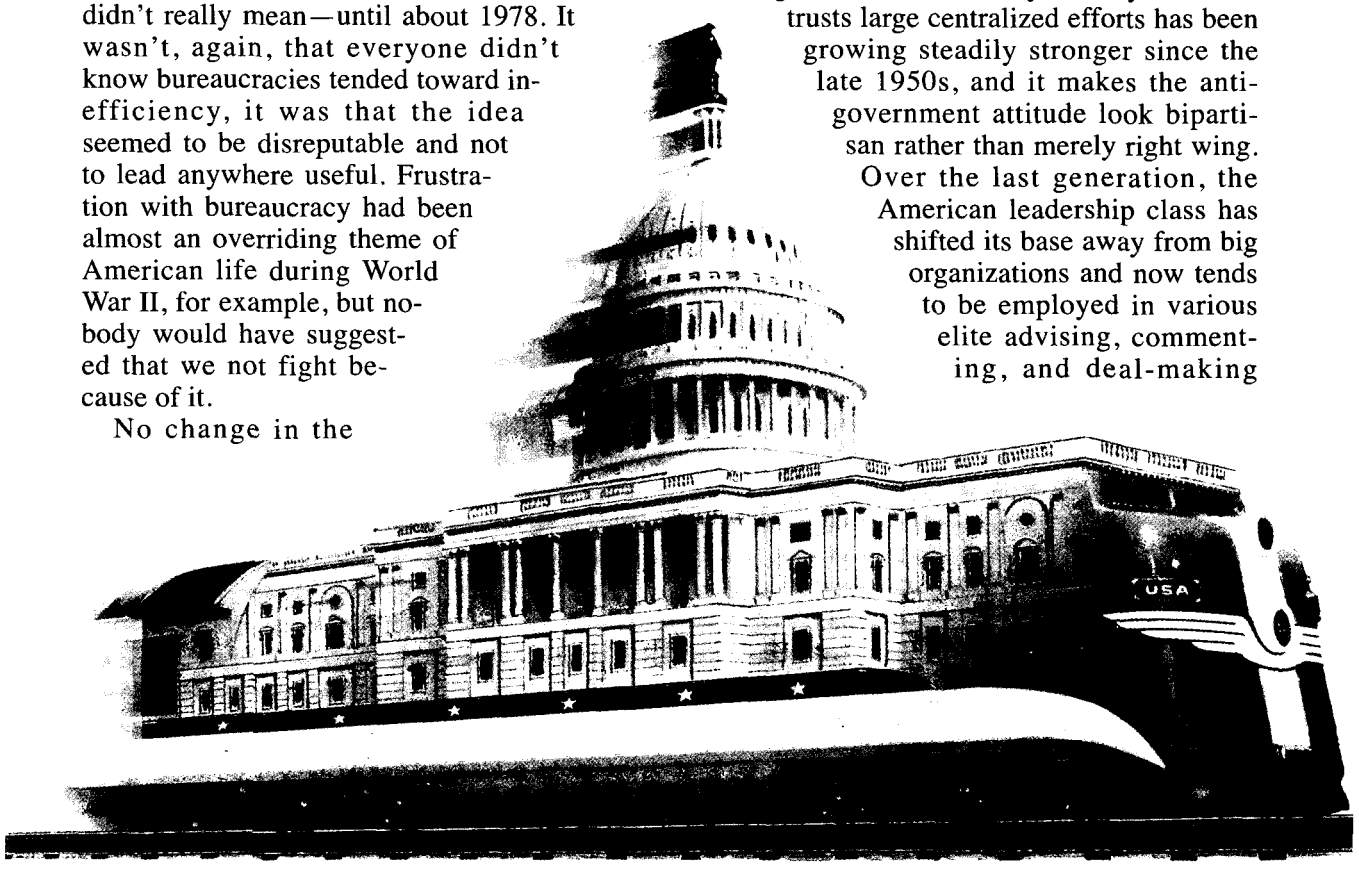
to change their minds about things; it was of overcoming the sense of "that may be true, but you just can't say it" that pervaded liberalism at the time. One of the main taboo subjects—probably *the* main one, in terms of the energy the magazine expended on it—was the inefficiency of government bureaucracies. This subject was considered the province of diehard anti-New Dealers and Taftites, people who either hadn't been able to come to terms with the realities of a modern industrial society or who were using a stated concern about government inefficiency as a polite cover for opposition to the basic health, education, and welfare provisions of the modern welfare state. Even among Republicans, ominous rhetoric about "big government" was considered faintly embarrassing—the kind of thing that one doled out for Nebraskans at fundraisers but didn't really mean—until about 1978. It wasn't, again, that everyone didn't know bureaucracies tended toward inefficiency, it was that the idea seemed to be disreputable and not to lead anywhere useful. Frustration with bureaucracy had been almost an overriding theme of American life during World War II, for example, but nobody would have suggested that we not fight because of it.

No change in the general climate of political thought over the last 10 or 15 years has been as dramatic as the one in the attitude toward government: We've gone from intellectual dishonesty about the genuine issue of inefficiency all the way over to a prevailing conviction of government's complete inefficiency. In the 1970s, Pandora's Box arguments were often thrown at *The Washington Monthly*: If you open up certain subjects for discussion, unimaginable disaster will result. That wasn't what happened in this case, though. The great and surprising political success of Ronald Reagan, first of all, demonstrated that running against the very idea of government could be a big winner, and in politics the intellectual climate often follows electoral trends rather than leading them. Also, a strain of thinking on the left that glorifies grassroots community activity and mistrusts large centralized efforts has been growing steadily stronger since the late 1950s, and it makes the anti-government attitude look bipartisan rather than merely right wing.

Over the last generation, the American leadership class has shifted its base away from big organizations and now tends to be employed in various elite advising, commenting, and deal-making



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roles; this has made hostility to big organizations a respectable prejudice. And, of course, there have been plenty of spectacular government failures to feed the attitude.

The result is that today the mission of *The Washington Monthly* is quite different from what it was in the seventies. The old pervasive liberal fear of discussing issues like crime and bureaucracy has almost completely disappeared—partly under the press of political expediency, since it became clear that liberals would almost always lose unless they gave up the luxury of refusing to confront tough questions, and partly thanks to the good work done by liberal rethinkers. Today there isn't the sense that an enormous struggle must be waged to induce liberals to confront the real issues facing the country: The level of agreement about what our problems are is vastly higher than it was in the seventies. The main difficulty now is that discussions of the mechanism for solving these problems have taken on a facile, unreal quality. One can now confidently assert, without fear of being challenged, that central government can *never* successfully address any problem, and that everything can be solved from the bottom up and without the participation of public agencies.

Desert Storming

Now we have to break this attitude down, and develop a body of real thinking, instead of an unthinking pose, about what makes government work and not work. The reason this is such a pressing need is simple and obvious, though to state it in the current climate is to risk becoming the kind of person friends nervously edge away from: Government is the best means of accomplishing a good many basic tasks in American society, so if government can't be invoked in political discourse, we can't discuss a great deal of what we need to do.

The area where just about the right attitude toward government prevails is military affairs: Everybody who has spent time around the military knows that bureaucratic inefficiency is a constantly looming danger, but nobody (except truly purist libertarians and disarmers) argues that there's any choice but to use a government agency to defend the country. Our military history is full of examples that could be used to support the proposition that government programs don't work—think of Pearl Harbor, the Bay of Pigs, Desert One, and the Beirut barracks bombing. Instead, in our better moments at least, we respond to such disasters by devising ways to make the military bureaucracy perform better, such as the unified field command that kept interservice rivalry from dominating Desert Storm.

But in domestic affairs, the leap from particular failures to a general dismissal of government is made all the time. It's probably made most often in the area of anti-poverty programs—the $2 billion a year War on Poverty has been used to drag down the whole concept of active government. By now, though, the idea that government by its nature never works hovers behind the discussion of almost every domestic issue. It's partly responsible, surely, for the decision of President Clinton (who seems to believe deep in his heart that government *can* work) to steer clear of a single-payer health care system, and even the conservative-sounding option he did choose is regularly attacked in terms like this one, from a *New York Times* headline: HEART OF CLINTON HEALTH PLAN: A SURLY BUREAUCRAT OR A PUBLIC SERVANT?

Clinton's "reinventing government" plan, which in public relations terms is meant to appeal to people who are skeptical about government, was attacked in *The Washington Times* by Thomas DiLorenzo for "its failure to acknowledge the fundamental fact that government is by nature wasteful, bureaucratic, and inefficient." The distrust of government also helps explain why by far the most expensive new social initiative Clinton has passed

Illustrations by Matt Brownson

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to date so far is a tax incentive (the expansion of the Earned Income Tax Credit—a good idea, by the way), not a service-providing program. It's already clear that the big problem with the next major item on the domestic agenda after health care, welfare reform, is people's unwillingness to believe that government social services can help get people off the dole—hence there is a lot of support for new welfare time limits but not much for new work programs that would get the people kicked off the rolls ready for steady employment.

There is a cognitive dissonance in discussions of all these issues. On the one hand, the idea of actually eliminating most of the existing big government bureaucracies is unthinkable, either because, as in the case of the military, everyone assumes they're a necessary evil, or, in the case of agencies like the Post Office and the Social Security Administration, because they matter so much to ordinary people that they're politically inviolable. On the other hand, influential people in American society—who themselves don't depend much on government services because they use private schools, private pensions, private police protection, private mail delivery (that is, messengers, faxes, and Federal Express)—have come to use as a starting point for consideration of new problems the idea that government never works, and business almost always works. Imagine yourself, dear reader, to be at a dinner table and to make a remark like, "The federal government could really improve inner-city public schools," or, "Government can build decent, safe housing for the poor." At this moment in history, the reaction to your comment would be like that of Margaret Dumont in a Marx Brothers movie (jaw dropping in disbelief, eyes widening in horror), wouldn't it?

Imagine yourself at a dinner table remarking, "The federal government could really improve inner-city public schools." At this moment in history, the reaction would be like that of Margaret Dumont in a Marx Brothers movie (jaw dropping in disbelief, eyes widening in horror).

Countervailing the anti-romance of big government is, currently, a romance of the private sector and of small local organizations. To say what's wrong with these attitudes is to state the obvious, but it has to be done. Business is sufficiently capable of bureaucratic inefficiency that it can't simply be assumed that it will always deliver and government never will. Examples like the automobile companies and the steel companies have become too familiar to have much impact; an example that may have more power to change minds comes from personal computers.

IBM, the traditional giant of the industry, for decades "worked" so well that it would be held up as the exemplar of the modern corporation. Then it notably didn't invent the personal computer. But what's interesting is the intermittent leadership of IBM. Garage inventors beat it to the PC; then, in the early eighties, IBM's outside-the-bureaucracy Entry Systems Division became the leader in the industry; then the head of the division died in a plane crash and IBM became a laughingstock; and in the last couple of years IBM has pulled itself together and become the leader in notebook computers. The lesson is that all bureaucracies, public and private, sometimes work and sometimes don't, depending on how they're organized and who leads them. Conversely, small organizations simply can't deliver everything an advanced society needs. Going back to the personal computer case, little Apple made it on the basis of

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technology appropriated from big Xerox; Microsoft made it by getting a crucial contract from IBM; and so on.

Government is actually full of examples of organizations that worked once or that work now. Public education is now one of the most often held up examples of a failed government program, even though, as one of the most localized government functions, it should according to the prevailing theory escape the iron law of bureaucratic failure. But what about the state universities? With exceptions, they clearly "work" in the sense that people from all over the world are clamoring to be admitted to them, even though they are run by big state bureaucracies with heavy federal involvement. (Even conservatives don't claim that the problems of higher education, such as tenure abuse and overpricing, are characteristic of the public system but not the private.)

The Post Office is generally acknowledged to work better now than it did in the 1970s. NASA worked magnificently well in the sixties, terribly in the eighties, and now seems to be getting its act together again. During the Depression, the Works Progress Administration, the Civilian Conservation Corps, and the Tennessee Valley Authority all worked, at least in the early going. During World War II, the Office of Price Administration did the theoretically impossible by keeping prices steady at a time of shortages and rapidly rising incomes. The military quickly developed such effective equipment as the P-51 fighter plane and the amphibious troop-transport boat. After the war, the interstate highway program may have been unpopular with liberal planners, but it worked. In the sixties, the military medical system in Vietnam did such a good job that it inspired a revolution in the practice of civilian emergency medicine. Today, probably the category of agency with the highest reputation inside government is the small monitoring or evaluating organization: Examples, not well known to the general public, are the Office of Technology Assessment, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, the Congressional Budget Office, and the General Accounting Office. Our system for ensuring the safety of prescription drugs, though often questioned on ideological grounds, is efficient.

Free Agencies

The skepticism about government bureaucracies—indeed, all bureaucracies—that *The Washington Monthly* has been trying to engender for a quarter century is not supposed to lead to a turning away from government and large organizations. Quite the opposite: It's supposed to lead to an obsession with them that will produce a clear sense of the difference between, and the causes of, good and bad performance. At the moment, because this obsession doesn't yet exist, it's possible only to suggest what the ground rules are that determine bureaucratic quality (which might replace the current ground rule, "Nothing government does can ever work").

Every agency has a constituency of clients—the people it theoretically exists to serve—and a constituency of employees and contractors. As believers in the virtues of the spoils system, we don't think government, to work, must focus wholly on the former groups and ignore the latter. But when the employees are more powerful in society than the clients, it sets the stage for inefficiency. For example, local police forces have a large employee constituency of lower-middle-class people, and a client constituency of poor people (the class from which most crime victims and criminals come)—so they tend toward corruption and in-

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efficiency. The same goes for inner-city public school systems, which employ vast armies of teachers and custodians while serving the powerless. On the other hand, for government employees in charge of processing millionaires' tax returns, or making sure private jets land safely, not much inefficiency will be tolerated.

Agencies with a fresh, urgent sense of mission tend to work; so do agencies with super-capable directors. As the urgency fades and directors begin to fossilize, watch out—think of the FBI, or Robert Moses's Triborough Bridge Authority in New York. Agencies that attract bright non-lifers who know their performance will be closely watched—for competence, not complaisance—by the institutions where their economic future rests have a built-in advantage: The Securities and Exchange Commission and the White House staff are examples. Smaller agencies work better than bigger agencies. Agencies whose output is highly public and easy to evaluate (the air traffic control system or the Secret Service, for example) work better than agencies that operate in a fog. Agencies whose foul-ups lead directly to complaints being made to members of Congress (the Social Security Administration) have a built-in spur toward efficiency, too.

Of course these conditions are not obtainable in every case. Sometimes they're only temporary, and sometimes (as in the case of inner-city schools) they hardly ever exist; in other words, there are cases when institutions simply can't be made to work on autopilot. So it's absolutely essential that the society pay closer attention to institutional performance. The role of the press here is especially important, and currently especially shameful. Even the biggest news organizations typically ignore the entire federal bureaucracy except in times of scandal or other crisis, while, by contrast, wildly overcovering national politics. Do you know who runs the Medicaid program? Neither do I. Imagine what a difference it would make if people like that, and the person who runs the Chapter One programs for poor elementary school kids, or the regulators who were supposed to monitor the savings and loans in the eighties, received one-tenth the intense scrutiny from the press that the likes of Ed Rollins and James Carville get. Reporters and editors ought to be ashamed of themselves for knowing so little about the consequences of the campaigns whose consequentiality they're always reminding us of.

Do you know who runs the Medicaid program? Neither do I. Imagine what a difference it would make if people like that, or the regulators who monitored the S&Ls in the 1980s, received one-tenth the scrutiny from the press that the likes of Ed Rollins and James Carville get.

Government bureaucracies exist in the first place for two reasons, one practical and one moral. The practical reason is that in modern industrial society, not everything can be accomplished by small local organizations. The moral reason is that communities and private business don't necessarily protect the interests of everybody in society—especially those who lack money, influence, education, and the life-stability that active citizenship requires. Government will work, some of the time, for some people: the people government can't afford to cross. Where it won't work is where it doesn't work now (and where the private sector doesn't, either), in the inner cities and other venues where bureaucratic failure is tolerated. Only one thing will make government perform in those places: attention. □

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Who's Who

ualify for a post in this administration: He went to St. lbans' with **Al Gore** and attended Yale Law School ith **Bill** and **Hillary Clinton**. In fact, a third of the pres- ent's first round of appointees, according to a survey y Knight-Ridder, went to Harvard or Yale or both . . . .

When **Bill Clinton** watered down a proposal require the government to use recycled pa- er, he was doing exactly what **Betsey Vright**, his former chief of staff in rkansas and now a lobbyist for the merican Forest and Paper Asso- ation, wanted him to do. . . .

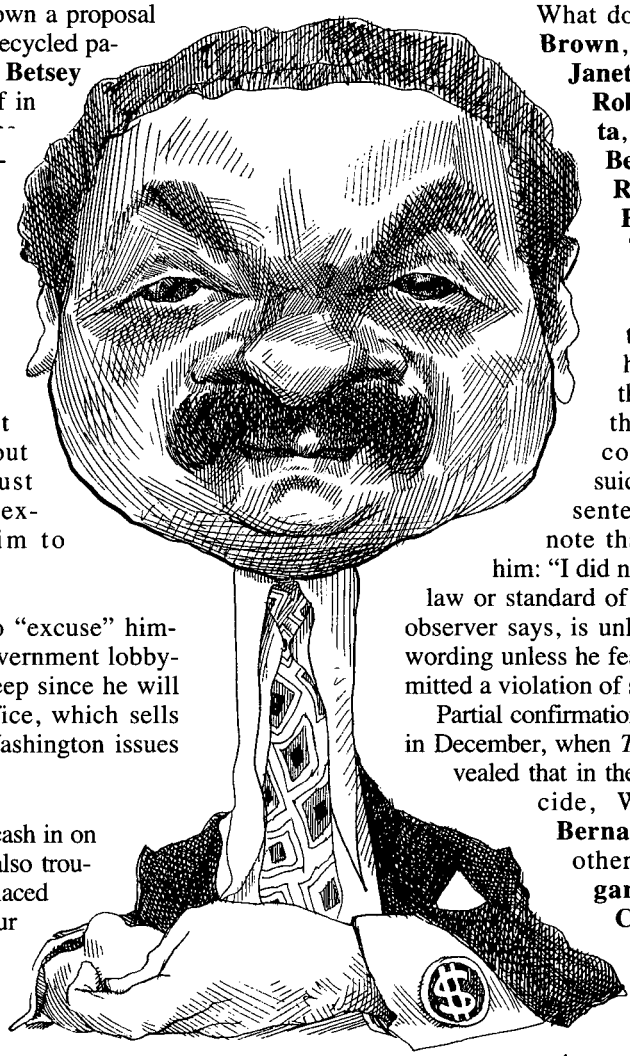
The two explanations of- red for the less-than-stellar uality of **Bill Clinton**'s ap- ointees are (1) that he oesn't want anyone as smart s he is, and (2) that because e Democrats have been out f power and public service out f style for so long, there just n't a large enough pool of ex- erience and ability for him to hoose from. . . .

Howard Paster's promise to "excuse" him- lf from Hill & Knowlton's government lobby- g is not going to be easy to keep since he will ead the firm's Washington office, which sells self on its ability to handle Washington issues r its clients. . . .

Roy Neel, whose own rush to cash in on s White House experience has also trou- ed many observers, is being replaced y **Philip Lader**, which makes our ecember report that Lader would ecome head of the White ouse personnel office one that e hope you'll forget about. . . .

For those who are wondering why the White House was forgiving of **Paster** and **Neel**'s leaving, a wise old friend f **Who's Who** offers this explanation: **Bill** and **Hillary linton** forever compromised their ability to crack down on fluence peddling when they participated in the Rose Law rm's use of her name to attract business when he was serv- g as governor. . . .

James Cannon's new book about **Gerald Ford**'s ascen- nce to the presidency says that **Al Haig,** before **Richard ixon** turned over the White House to Ford, told Ford that Nixon wanted to be pardoned. Cannon also explains why there was no confession of culpability in Nixon's acceptance of the pardon. Although Ford wanted an admission of guilt as a condition of granting a pardon, Haig secretly informed Nixon that Ford would not insist on it. . . .



What do cabinet members **Ron Brown**, **Warren Christopher**, **Janet Reno**, **Bruce Babbitt**, **Robert Reich**, **Leon Panetta**, **Mickey Kantor**, **Lloyd Bentsen**, **Henry Cisneros**, **Richard Riley**, and **Mike Espy** have in common? They're all lawyers. . . .

A veteran observer tells us that as much as he wants to think well of the late **Vincent Foster**, the White House deputy counsel who committed suicide last spring, there is a sentence from Foster's last note that continues to trouble him: "I did not knowingly violate any law or standard of conduct." A lawyer, the observer says, is unlikely to have used such wording unless he feared he might have committed a violation of some kind.

Partial confirmation of this impression came in December, when *The Washington Times* revealed that in the hours after Foster's suicide, White House counsel **Bernard Nussbaum** and two other **Clinton** aides—**Margaret Williams, Hillary Clinton**'s chief of staff, and **Patsy L. Thomasson**, a special assistant to the president—removed documents having to do with the Clintons' personal business from Foster's office. As regular readers of **Who's Who** will remember, we worried last summer that Foster should never have tried to represent both the public interest as deputy White House counsel and the First Family's private interests as their personal lawyer. (And we were glad to see *The New York Times* pick up on our point in December.) The potential for a conflict between the public good and the Clintons' interests was the danger area, and something may have happened that at last awakened Foster to the reality of that conflict . . . .

—*Susan Threadgill*

Roman Genn

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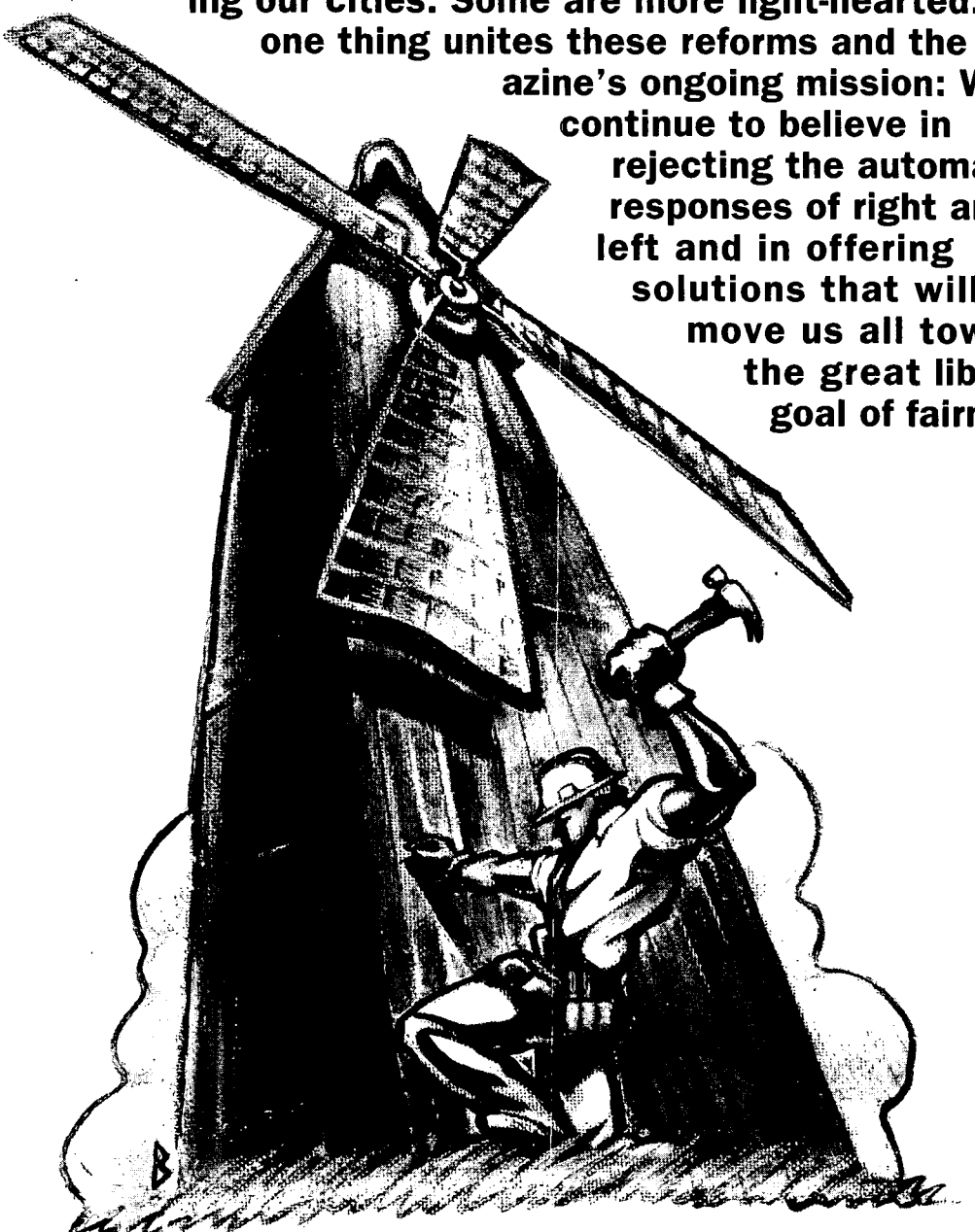
My Favorite Reform

To mark the *Monthly*'s 25th anniversary, in the following pages and in coming issues, past editors will offer their views on where government and society are broken and what we can do to repair the damage. Some reforms are deadly serious, such as how to control the violence that is destroying our cities. Some are more light-hearted. But one thing unites these reforms and the magazine's ongoing mission: We continue to believe in rejecting the automatic responses of right and left and in offering solutions that will move us all toward the great liberal goal of fairness.



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Make National Service Mandatory for All

BY PHIL KEISLING

In 1973, the United States made a big mistake—and so did I.

That year, an unlikely coalition of anti-Vietnam War liberals and Milton Friedman-inspired conservatives convinced Richard Nixon and Congress to abolish the military draft. Also that year, I turned 18, drew a high lottery number, and wasn't about to volunteer for a military still fighting a war I strongly opposed.

But neither did I seriously think about volunteering for the Peace Corps, VISTA, or similar organizations. I told myself I'd get around to it someday—and then proceeded directly to Yale and built a career that now has included journalism, service in the state legislature, and election to statewide office in Oregon.

Twenty years later, the foolishness of both decisions increasingly gnaws at me. I have become convinced that the U.S.—like most industrialized nations—should enact a mandatory system of national service. But we should go much further than the draft ever did and even further than the systems widely used elsewhere in the world.

Such a system should be mandatory, not voluntary. It should be broad, not narrow, with exceptions based on inability rather than personal inconvenience. (Exceptions for prison inmates, for example, but definitely not for the college-bound or well-heeled). It should involve women as well as men, in stark contrast to our draft and the male-only service plans of most other countries. Eventually, it should ask something of all Americans, just as the jury system (at least in theory) does now.

Phil Keisling, an editor of The Washington Monthly *from 1982 to 1984, is Oregon's Secretary of State.*

Obviously, national service would be costly and raises a host of practical and logistical problems. For example, given that between 3 and 4 million Americans turn 18 each year, a full-fledged program might easily cost $50 billion a year, including living expenses, supervisory costs, and G.I. Bill-style benefits for additional education and training.

Participants would have to be properly trained and supervised. They would need to do real jobs, not make-work. Serious problems with discipline, drug and alcohol abuse, criminal behavior, and shoddy work would be inevitable. It would require the kind of well-planned, efficient government organization that most Americans consider highly doubtful if not impossible.

Considerable obstacles, to be sure. But we've risen to considerable organizational challenges before, from World War II and the sixties' space program to the recent flooding in the Midwest. And consider the costs, tangible and intangible, of *not* having such a system.

For starters, today's military budget is higher than it would be if highly compensated, career-track men and women were a substantially smaller backbone of our armed services than they are today. Personnel costs—which account for a far greater share of Pentagon spending than all our low-tech and high-tech weapons and missiles put together—would be billions lower. So would retirement costs, which now run more than $11.8 billion a year.

Given current military manpower needs, only about 10 percent of the 18-to-21-year-old population would be needed in uniform. What to do with the rest?

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Just think about five areas—education; public safety; health care; the rural environment; the urban environment. Now think of all the work that *isn't* getting done—and the tremendous price we're paying for that.

The nation's infrastructure is in shambles, requiring trillions of dollars for repair and costing billions each year in lost economic opportunities. Crime and gang activity increase as our police have far too little presence in our communities. Educational achievement falls and drop-outs increase as classes get bigger and bigger, students bring more serious problems into the classroom, and teachers feel overwhelmed. Health care costs skyrocket, in part because we lack even the most rudimentary ability to provide simple, prevention-based care. Young parents go on or stay on welfare because basic child care is unavailable, too expensive, too low in quality, or all three.

Just one example: It's been estimated that as many as 300,000 Americans now in nursing homes—and half of the nation's nursing home costs are financed through Medicaid—could be served in normal community settings if they had someone to assist them in their daily routines.

Community service helps not just the receiver, but the giver. Many of our young people succumb to too-early parenthood, to drug and alcohol abuse, to gangs and violence. National service obviously won't be a panacea. But it can communicate a powerful message that often isn't received by our younger citizens—that you can make a difference. You matter. Society values your contribution. The self-esteem that's built from tutoring a younger child, cleaning up a park, or talking a peer out of self-destructive behavior can be a powerful antidote to the devastating—and expensive—trends now so prevalent in our society.

Finally, consider the less tangible but staggering costs to our society and its democratic underpinnings as our citizens become increasingly divided and isolated from each other, not just along racial lines but class lines as well. Consider, too, the widespread ethos that encourages people to think of government as merely a broker among interest groups—with the loudest and best-organized holding sway—and "citizenship" as a collection of rights but not responsibilities.

The military draft, at least for a subset of the male population, used to play that democratizing role. It exposed people of different backgrounds to each other but also—and this is critical—asked them to work together on something of importance. The military never has been and likely never will be a paragon of virtue; don't forget racial discrimination and, more recently, Tailhook and the official ban on homosexuals. But millions of Americans have learned invaluable lessons about citizenship, the value of individuals, and democracy because the draft gave them no other choice.

This democratizing institution is now gone. And our second major democratizing institution—our public schools—is in true peril, increasingly homogenous, and unacceptably inadequate in educating all of our citizens.

I'm a realist. Comprehensive national service won't arrive tomorrow or next year. Still, I believe that Americans would be far more receptive to such a call for service than many believe.

Volunteers today already contribute billions of hours to worthy community projects through their schools, churches, and civic associations. The Peace Corps recently received 115,000 inquiries for fewer than 3,200 slots. College students are increasingly engaging in service, like the group from the Los Angeles area who spent their spring break in Portland this year helping weatherize low-income homes. Secondary schools—sometimes at the behest of the students themselves—are putting service into their core curricula. And during the campaign, to the eye-rolling surprise of his chief aides, President Clinton consistently received his heartiest applause when he talked about national service.

I never did find time to take those two years. Along with the rhetorical discomfort it obviously now causes—"How can you advocate mandatory service for others if you didn't serve yourself?"—has been an acute sense of important lessons and experiences not learned and perhaps never attainable.

The strong friendships I forged in my early adulthood inevitably were among people with largely similar aspirations and social, professional, and ethnic backgrounds. And the small efforts I have made since, such as being active in (and recently moving back to) an inner-city, lower-middle income neighborhood are but pale

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substitutes for devoting a year or two, full time, to a worthy cause.

Clinton's voluntary service plan, where students get stipends and educational vouchers, is a decent start. But it's only a small start. My hope is that this new initiative is so quickly overwhelmed with applicants that our choice becomes a clear one: Either we turn a vast number of Americans away or boldly decide to include all of them and millions more in an unprecedented effort to help ourselves.

It's a good investment—and it's the right thing to do. After all, if millions around the world believe that democracy is worth risking their lives for, isn't it time we acknowledge that it's at least worth interrupting our lives for here at home? □

Curb Violence by Targeting Bullets

BY JONATHAN ALTER

The first battle in America's war at home has been won. That battle was over simply acknowledging that the war existed in the first place—that even though violence has not increased appreciably in recent years, we've been in a state of denial about its Vietnam-like toll. 1993 will be remembered as the year when we woke up and realized that other nations thought we were insane—and that perhaps they were right. The elements driving this first victory were a series of especially gruesome murders, a new administration receptive to some gun control, the re-definition of gun violence as a public health issue, and a news media that has moved from an unthinking "If it bleeds, it leads" mentality to at least occasionally more sophisticated coverage of the root causes of violence.

Beyond confronting those root causes, the more immediate battle requires heavier—and more creative—firepower. A complete ban on the manufacture and sale of handguns will never happen in this country, so we've got to begin thinking about other points of entry. The Clinton administration is already on track with the first part of the agenda: banning assault weapons, tightening gun dealership regulation, and establishing a national gun permit system that makes obtaining a gun license at least as difficult as getting a driver's license. Like the Brady Bill, these are small changes that require considerable work and commitment and won't make much of a dent in gun violence. But they are a start. The next, much more difficult step is to turn the gun into just another consumer product that can be regulated by the federal government. If the Consumer Product Safety Commission finds a toy to be dangerous, it orders it withdrawn from the market. The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (or a successor bureau with more teeth and less baggage) should have the power to recall especially dangerous handguns and ammunition at any time, which would still preserve the overarching right to manufacture and sell certain kinds of guns.

Even this will not do anything about the illegal guns used in most crimes. By some estimates, there are already 200 million guns out there that would be unaffected by any gun control legislation.

So it's time for a different approach.

"When the French could not build the Panama Canal and the Americans did, it is because we had figured out that yellow jack was carried

Jonathan Alter, an editor of The Washington Monthy *from 1981 to 1983, is a columnist at* Newsweek.

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by the anopheles mosquito," Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan says. "We did not, in fact, understand the actual virus, but we knew the vector that carried it to the human host. And we did not issue fly swatters, we drained the swamp."

The violence pathogen that Moynihan favors analyzing is ammunition, which is not, by the way, covered explicitly by the Second Amendment. There is little if any research on bullet control, so the first goal is simply to create some ferment on the issue. Is it true, for instance, that there is only a four-year supply of ammo in the U.S.? No one knows the answer. Moynihan's plan to apply a 10,000 percent tax on some bullets is worth trying. It would reduce the supply of certain bullets in the short run, but it's insignificant as a revenue-raiser, and without restructuring the industry, ammo makers would simply increase production of equally odious bullets. The Black Talon hollow-point bullet was recently recalled and everybody cheered, but there remain at least 12 other kinds of equally dangerous hollow-points that can meet demand.

A more radical solution would be: 1) require that all bullets be bought with a special credit card that identified the purchaser, and 2) require serial numbers on every bullet, perhaps engraved on an indestructible microchip that cannot be smashed on impact (and which would help make bullets more expensive). Once the bullet is scanned for its number, a warrant could be immediately issued for the arrest of the purchaser. This would provide a strong incentive for gun owners to lock up their guns and ammo so that they won't be stolen, which would cut down on the household accidents that cause so many gun deaths. It would also encourage the reporting of stolen guns and ammo, which would lead to more people being brought in who are wanted by authorities on other charges.

Eventually, the government could permit the manufacture of only those bullets that fit certain guns—and no others. That could turn millions of weapons into overnight antiques. Such a change would require advances in bullet technology that have not been attempted so far. Right now, much ammunition is interchangeable between hunting rifles and handguns. But new bullet technology could conceivably prevent that. It may even be possible to convince the gun industry that it stands to win a huge new market—thousands of legitimate gun owners who would have to buy new, heavily regulated guns to fit the new, permissible bullets.

There are obvious practical problems that would have to be solved. Overnight, a huge black market in homemade bullets would spring up, and bullet smuggling could make drug smuggling look like small potatoes. But we have got to be open to Moynihan's process of creative thinking on violence.

In the meantime, advocates of gun and ammo control must acknowledge some uncomfortable truths. If they expect conservatives to compromise long-held convictions and move toward the mainstream on guns and bullets, they must move toward the mainstream on punishing criminals. That means pushing to reform the juvenile justice system so that young thugs can be sentenced as adults, supporting "three strikes and you're out" proposals (three violent—with the emphasis on violent—felony convictions and you get a life sentence), and greater constitutional latitude on search and seizure.

Busting our mental blocks on crime means that it's no longer good enough to say, "The problem is guns, not lenient judges," (ACLU) or "The problem is career criminals, not guns," (the NRA) or "The problem is guns, not violence in the media," (Hollywood liberals) or "The problem is violence in the media, not guns," (the U.S. Senate). *All* of these are problems, and anyone who doesn't recognize that has no business being taken seriously in the debate. □

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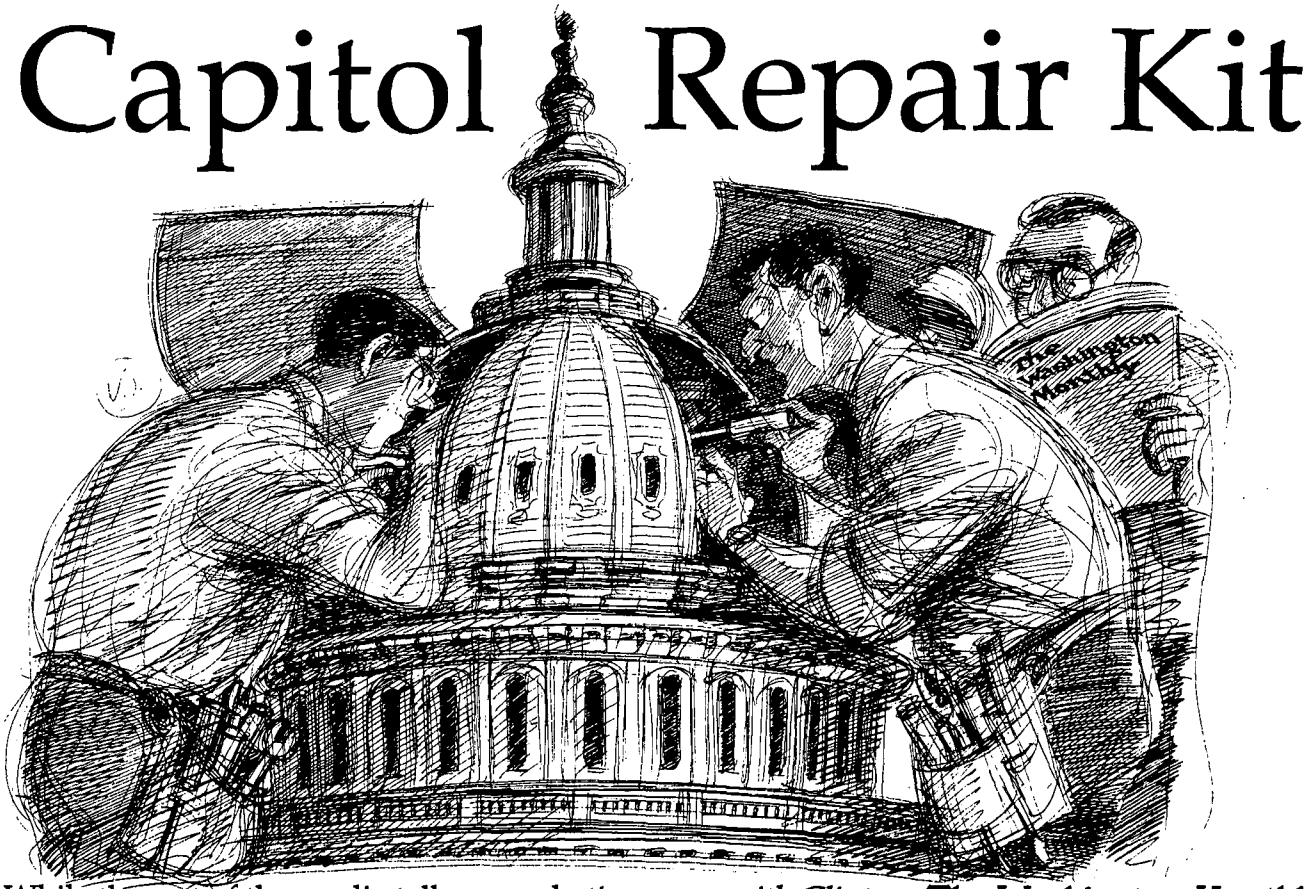

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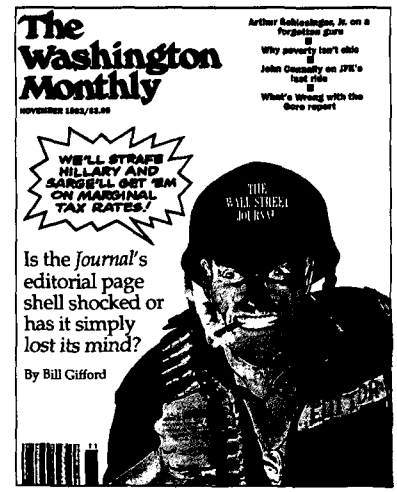

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End FBI Background Checks, Abolish Peremptory Strikes

BY TAYLOR BRANCH

My contemporary files are haphazard and my brain is rusty on applications of the *Monthly* gospel, so long have I been soaking in the racial and religious affairs of 30 years ago. Removed from public debate—in fact just now learning who Tim Russert is—I have no burning policy changes in mind beyond the desire for a birth of democracy in Haiti, which calls not really for reform but for an application of will. My reform proposals are eccentric leftovers, perfect for the beginning of a president's third term.

➤ End FBI Background Checks

This practice is an appendage of the Cold War. Truman, having thwarted J. Edgar Hoover's ridiculous ambition to be in charge of foreign intelligence, gave him as a consolation prize the government employee loyalty program. To ensure the fitness of public officials, Hoover naturally used dragnet interviews, faceless accusers, and other Star Chamber methods. Hearings and public witnesses were set aside as too trusting, sloppy, and dangerous in a world of enemies. Without Hoover's vigilance over the government, people feared, Klaus Fuchs would worm his way into David Gergen's office and sell secrets to Saddam long before anyone figured him for a spy.

The background check is what's left of the loyalty program. Americans take it for granted that no one can be considered for any job, from Supreme Court Justice to deputy assistant secretary, until hordes of highly trained criminal agents have interviewed their kindergarten teachers, all in strictest confidence. Aside from giving every administration some cover for molasses-slow appointments—"We're waiting for the FBI check"—this process has no positive value. It wastes time. For the public, it gives a false, machine-like quality to government appointments. From all angles—senators, citizens, reporters, neighbors—we don't take as seriously the citizenship duty to help evaluate our nominees because we leave responsibility to the FBI.

For the FBI itself, background checks are a senseless diversion from its statutory mission to investigate federal crime. They are also a holdover of Hoover's political agenda, an invitation to corruption by government-wide dossier. No one ever discusses the exact percentage of FBI agents detailed to background investigations, in part, I think, because disclosure opens the subject of an uncomfortable, incompatible FBI mission. The lingering secrecy is a reminder of potential damage to the FBI's performance and reputation. A reform director like Louis Freeh would be well rid of the program.

➤ Abolish peremptory strikes in court

Here again we genuflect to an archaic ritual. Peremptory strikes are considerably older than Hoover's loyalty program, traceable in English common law to the medieval reign of King Edward I. Back then, early in the development of trials by jury, the crown controlled the panels of prospective jurors, and the reformer King Edward was good enough to reduce his advantage by granting the wretched accused a certain number of arbitrary removals that required no reason or explanation. According to the great British legal theorist Blackstone, the establishment of the peremptory challenge was a "provision full of that tenderness and humanity to prisoners for which our English laws are justly famous."

In America, where we have fewer crowns and more lawyers, we gave peremptory strikes to the

Taylor Branch, an editor of The Washington Monthly *from 1970 to 1973, is the author of* Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-1963.

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prosecutors, too. The numbers and procedures vary, but before jury trials there comes a stage first when jurors are removed for cause. By confession and examination before the judge, those with a personal connection, conflict, or express bias are excused. Then comes the game of peremptory strikes, in which the opposing lawyers trade removals from the jury box, usually with no more procedure than whispered conference and long silent stares. Sometimes the lawyers are allowed to have a juror stand silently to show off the cut of his or her jib, but the whole point of "peremptory" is that the strikes are wordless and unexplained. The exercise is pure wizardry on the part of the battling lawyers.

I first questioned peremptory strikes because of the added burden on citizens. For each trial, court clerks must call in advance two or three times more people than needed to jury duty to allow for the strikes, and since the opposing lawyers presumably neutralize each other, I wondered what theoretical gain for justice might justify the inconvenience, expense, and indignity. (Even the judge seems reduced during the process, telling the struck jurors, who are usually ecstatic to be leaving, that they should not feel personally rejected.) Why not simply draw a random jury from those not excused for cause? Having first screened those with a discovered bias, why go to so much trouble to put the bias back in through a silent lawyers auction of jurors?

Over the years, I found one constitutional lawyer friend who put me on to Blackstone's explanation, but no one who knew or offered an argument as to why we have better juries after the peremptory strikes. It boiled down to naked precedent, which counts for a lot, of course. In this one area, the law is so determined to preserve what Blackstone calls an "arbitrary and capricious" feature that very important cases have come before the Supreme Court over the past two decades testing whether the peremptory strikes are peremptory enough. First in race cases, then in sex cases, the Court's rulings have moved toward a standard of restricted or refined arbitrariness, to require that the strikes not be racially or sexually guided. In other words, the lawyers are supposed to be thinking arbitrarily, since they cannot examine the thoughts or histories of the jurors, but the first thing that pops into their minds should not be the race or sex of the jurors in the pool.

This is a complicated new field of litigation, and I do not wish to minimize the subtleties involved. Since the whole point of peremptory strikes is that the lawyers are kings here, and must not give a reason, it is no small difficulty for appeals courts to scrutinize any reasoning that might have crept in. Does the right to be arbitrary shield the lawyers from examination? If forced to answer, are trial lawyers ethically bound to say they didn't *have* any reason for their strikes? The attempt to reconcile privilege with open fairness is absurd on its face, which, of course, entices legal theorists. Appeals judges have decided that certain clusters of strikes—such as prosecutors excluding male jurors in rape cases—are peremptory but not capricious, in that a certain logic may be inferred from the pattern. In other words, some patterned arbitrariness is too rational to be capricious, and must be proscribed by any reasonable test of what is legally peremptory.

If the contending lawyers were permitted to admit any strategic thought behind their strikes, they would be obliged to say they were thinking of something like hair color or age rather than sex or race. Future appeals may find that any pattern loses the required capriciousness and becomes rational enough to be banned as hairism and ageism. Now that the peremptory strikes are more carefully conducted and reviewed—requiring more billing time and more jurors—many lawyers will affect a kind of random arbitrariness in their strikes. However, this defense raises a danger that some fool like myself will propose getting the same results by drawing names from a hat. To protect the dignity of the bar from such simplicity, shrewd practitioners will maintain that legal training and experience confer a mystical ability to recognize a certain *je ne sais quoi* of justice, one way or other, in the blank face of every prospective juror. □

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Ban the Designated Hitter

BY JOSEPH NOCERA

Sports, as any cliché-spouting coach will happily tell you, are like life. How true, how true. Today, though, I'm pleased to introduce my own corollary to this most overused of truths. Sometimes, sports are like a particular slice of life: the public sector slice. Nocera's Law says that at those moments when sports resembles government, sports lose.

I offer, as Exhibit A, baseball's designated hitter. Like so many government programs, the designated hitter, which the American League instituted 20 years ago (the National League never succumbed), was born of good intentions that were never fulfilled. Like the government, it provides gainful employment for workers who either have lost most of their skills (Greg Luzinski! Jack Clark!) or don't have many skills to begin with (Sam Horn! Steve Balboni!) It robs the game of some of its most interesting strategy; managers in a non-designated hitter world choose their teams weighing both the offensive and defensive talents of each player. The DH rule eliminates that strategic consideration for one player, affecting both line-up decisions and game tactics for the whole team. The designated hitter also distorts records, screws up young ballplayers, and makes a complete mess of the World Series. Just as presidents occasionally try—and usually fail—to get rid of a government department whose time has passed, so have baseball commissioners tried and failed to get rid of the designated hitter. Fay Vincent used to regularly label it "an abomination"—and look where that got him. That this travesty lives on today is a testament to the power of inertia and entrenched unions. But then, can't the same be said for the Agricultural Extension Service?

I loathe the designated hitter, but what I particularly loathe about it is its sheer pointlessness. Twenty years ago, the designated hitter came into being because the game was in the doldrums and needed an infusion of offensive excitement—or so the numbskull owners believed. Their diagnosis, in fact, was correct—the game was in the doldrums—but what brought it back were the decisions, in the late 1960s, to lower the pitcher's mound while shrinking the strike zone (which, as they say, helped level the playing field between pitchers and hitters), and the return to baseball by nostalgic baby boomers.

In fact, it's not too much to say that the DH has done absolutely nothing to make the game more interesting or exciting. The players who fill this position are almost never intrinsically exciting—the DH practically defines mediocrity in sports. In the whole 20-year period it has existed, can you think of any designated hitters who could unambiguously be classified as all stars? I can think of exactly one: Paul Molitor, who was Toronto's DH

Joseph Nocera, an editor of The Washington Monthly *from 1978 to 1979 and now a columnist for* GQ *magazine, is writing a book about the history of personal finance in America, to be published this fall by Simon & Schuster.*

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this year. One all star every 20 years just doesn't cut it.

What is exciting is watching a manager handle what used to be the classic baseball situation: What does he do late in a close game, with two outs, runners on second and third, and the pitcher coming to bat? What's exciting is seeing a good-hitting pitcher help his own cause—something that happens much less often than it used to, even in the National League, because minor league pitchers rarely hit anymore. What's even more exciting is seeing a pitcher being called on to pinch hit, something that used to happen once in a while before the DH robbed the game of such fun moments.

Of course, if you follow baseball, you know all this. And chances are you agree with me. So why can't anyone put the DH out of its misery? The simple, painful answer is that baseball's all-powerful players' union won't let it happen. See, the DH is the perfect position for old guys who can't run or throw anymore—and who, if they played any other sport, would have long since retired. Old guys are card-carrying union members. They like having these jobs where they make $2 million a year for 15 minutes of hitting a day. Who wouldn't? If the DH were abolished, that roster spot would in all likelihood go to some hungry kid in Triple A who makes $10,000 a year, and whose path to the majors is being blocked by an over-the-hill DH. The kid, you will not be surprised to learn, is not a member of the players' union. To its ever-lasting shame, the players' union is restricted to major league players. So think of the DH as the ultimate bad bureaucrat: He wants to get paid a lot, do little work, and keep out anyone else who could do the job better.

So that's the reform I would institute if someone handed me the magic reform wand. I would abolish the DH. It would make the game better, the managers smarter, and the fans happier. It would create jobs for the deserving, not the undeserving. It would return sanity to the World Series. In sum, it would make America a better place. □

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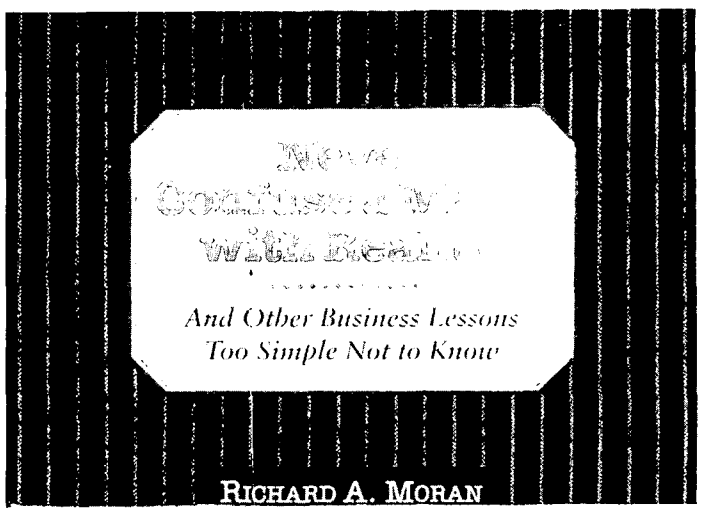

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The Press Ruined Presidential Campaigns

. . . and other dubious assumptions about the media and politics

BY JEFF GREENFIELD

Out of Order: How the Decline of the Political Parties and the Growing Power of the News Media Undermine the American Way of Electing Presidents
Thomas E. Patterson, *Knopf, $23*

If the folks at the Smithsonian are looking for a new feature to drum up business, let me suggest that they start planning a Hall of Dubious Assumptions About How Our Political System Works. This exhibit—which might take up the entire National Mall—could begin with the fears from the early days of television that the new medium would endow a president with such power that he would assume near-imperial authority. It would then feature the assertions, in the wake of what happened to Johnson, Nixon, Ford, and Carter, that television had diminished the presidency to the point of impotence. We could then add a whole display of electoral certainties, followed by their collapse in the face of reality:

- The nominating process put too much power in the hands of such states as Iowa and New Hampshire.

Except that the big Iowa caucus winners in 1988 were Bob Dole and Dick Gephardt, the surprise showing was made by Pat Robertson, and the big loser was George Bush. Moreover, in the Democratic primaries, the big states have decided the nominee ever since 1980.

- With the press performing the gatekeeping functions once performed by party regulars, candidates are subject to disintegration if they commit a gaffe or are caught up in scandal.

Except that no candidate committed more gaffes than Ronald Reagan in 1980, and Bill Clinton demonstrated that the whiff of scandal or misdeed—even when backed by credible evidence—does not necessarily destroy a presidential campaign.

- The horserace-based, frenetic, poll-obsessed, "who's-ahead-who's-behind" coverage of politics has disconnected the voter from the process.

Except that in 1992, the American public found new connections to the political process and developed a renewed enthusiasm for politics that resulted in a huge increase in turnout.

Regrettably, Thomas Patterson's new book deserves a place in this Hall of Dubious Assumptions. I say "regrettably" because Patterson is one of the most valuable academic observers of the campaign process. His previous works, particularly *The Unseeing Eye*, offered fresh, provocative insights into how American voters receive and process political information. In *Out of Order*, however, Patterson has given us an account of the press's role in the political process that is a rehash of familiar observations. Some of them are true; others I

Jeff Greenfield is Political and Media Analyst for ABC News and a syndicated columnist.

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find highly questionable. But to anyone who has worried about the role the press plays in choosing presidents, Patterson's offerings will seem, to put it mildly, warmed-over fare of little nutritional value.

The thesis of *Out of Order* is clear: "The United States cannot have a sensible campaign as long as it is built around the news media. . . The press is in the news business, not the business of politics, and because of this, its norms and imperatives are not those required for the effective organization of electoral coalitions and debates. Journalistic values and political values are at odds with each other."

Fair enough. Patterson is on firm, if well-trod, ground when he notes, with persuasive and anecdotal analysis, that the "watchdog" function of the press has a corrosive effect in the absence of countervailing pressure from established political parties. The dominant tone of campaign coverage, shaped by the "strategic schema" the press brings to politics, is that nothing a candidate says is ever an expression of sincerely held belief; that expressions of policy, programs, and values all are to be interpreted as moves in the game of political manipulation; that nothing is to be taken at face value.

The result? "By emphasizing the game dimension day after day, the press forces it to the forefront, strengthening the voters' mistrust of the candidates and reducing their sense of involvement. The press has this effect because the game schema drives its analysis, and its capacity to see the campaign in other ways is limited."

It is when Patterson ventures back and forth through recent political history to prove his point that his problems start. To begin with, there is in his account a powerful sense of the pastoral—a conviction that things used to be different and better—which brings to mind Burt Lancaster's comment in *Atlantic City* to a first-time visitor: "You shoulda seen the ocean in the old days."

For instance, Patterson quotes Alexander Hamilton's arguments in *The Federalist* that presidents would not be chosen on their "talents for low intrigue, and the little arts of popularity." Patterson's comment on this? "The same claim would be laughable today. 'The little arts of popularity' are at the heart of the modern media campaign."

Maybe so; but "the talent for low intrigue" has been a staple of the American presidential campaign from 1800, when Jefferson and Burr battled for the presidency, or since 1824, when followers of John Quincy Adams deprived Andrew Jackson of the victory he'd won. Indeed, it's at least plausible that one of the virtues of a primary-based, press-dominated system is that political insiders cannot employ their "talents for low intrigue" to deny a nomination to an insurgent figure, such as Ronald Reagan in 1980 or Bill Clinton in 1992.

A few pages later, Patterson argues that "in no other era has the course of presidential campaigns been so unpredictable or hinged so much on small issues as in recent years." He then presents an account of recent campaigns that is a model of reductive reasoning: Bush

Illustration by Paul Forsyth

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won the New Hampshire primary in 1988 because Dole wouldn't sign a no-new-taxes pledge; Mondale recovered against Hart in 1984 because he asked him "where's the beef" in a debate; Reagan won in New Hampshire in 1980 by declaring "I'm paying for this microphone!"; Muskie did less well in New Hampshire than he had to do because he seemed to cry.

The problem is that these "turning points" may have been far less consequential than other, more substantial reasons for political success or failure. Maybe Bush won in New Hampshire in 1988 because that state, in the midst of an economic boom, saw Bush as the heir to the (then) highly popular Reagan; maybe Hart lost in 1984 because he was too unfamiliar, too suspect as a potential president; maybe Reagan won in 1980 because his long-held conservative beliefs were what mainstream Republicans finally wanted to rally behind; maybe Muskie lost in 1972 because a centrist, complacent campaign with no ideological content is always vulnerable to a candidacy fueled by powerful ideological fervor.

Similarly, it is equally possible to assign victory or defeat back in the "good old days" to equally "small issues." Patterson himself mentions the 1884 campaign, when a follower of James G. Blaine called Democrats the party of "rum, Romanism, and rebellion." But what about the 1916 campaign, when a botched meeting between California's Hiram Johnson and GOP nominee Charles Evans Hughes caused California Republican progressives to sit on their hands, thus delivering the state, and the White House, to Woodrow Wilson? What about 1948, when a cutting remark by Thomas Dewey about his "idiot" railroad engineer alienated countless blue-collar workers? And what about John Kennedy's 1960 telephone call to get Martin Luther King, Jr., out of a Southern jail, thus swinging (we now assume) black votes that made the difference in states such as Illinois and Texas?

No candidate stumbled more in the press spotlight than Ronald Reagan in 1980. He got his facts wrong and sometimes could not remember his own economic plan. He should have been whistled off the field by the middle of the primary season, if the often-scornful press coverage was any guide. Why did he flourish even as Ted Kennedy's primary challenge to Jimmy Carter was fading in the wake of similarly tough press scrutiny?

What Patterson ignores, I suggest, is the possibility that the press coverage of a presidential campaign—for all the flaws of pack journalism, obsession with strategy, and often incoherent explanation of issues—may not be the powerful influence on presidential campaigns that he thinks it is. The hypothesis that the American public has ways of determining how it feels about candidates that are independent of the established political press, or at least independent of the judgments the press wishes to make, is at least worth investigating.

No candidate stumbled more in the press spotlight than Ronald Reagan in 1980. He got his facts wrong and sometimes could not remember his own economic plan. He should have been whistled off the field by the middle of the primary season, if the often-scornful press coverage was any guide. Why did he flourish even as Ted Kennedy's primary challenge to Jimmy Carter was fading in the wake of similarly tough press scrutiny? Is it not at least possible that the

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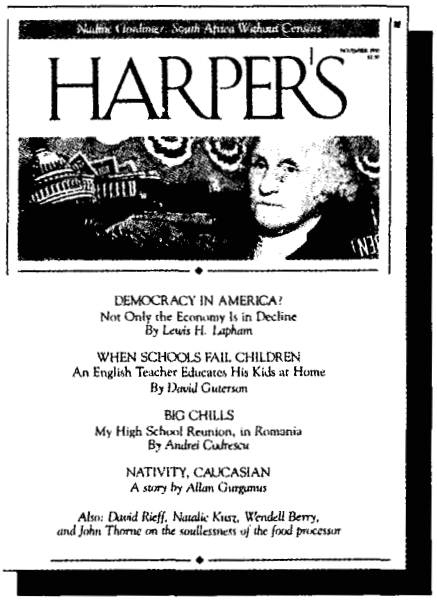

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electorate decided, in the midst of hyperinflation, an industrial recession, and a battered foreign policy that it wanted a clear break with the past? Is it not at least possible that the voting public understood much of the daily ebb and flow of press coverage was essentially irrelevant to its judgment about what was needed?

What gives this possibility added force, in my view, is what happened in 1992. Patterson gives relatively little attention to the remarkable nature of the last campaign, asserting that the 1992 campaign was "saved" by the debates, Ross Perot's candidacy, and the participation of the "new" media. My own view is much stronger: In 1992, I believe, many of the fundamental flaws of traditional press coverage were cured by the availability of different forms of political communication.

Had the traditional press silenced the candidates' voices by compressing their views into eight or 12 second sound bites? In 1992, voters could hear them for an hour or more on the morning news shows, on "Larry King Live," on MTV.

Were the political weekend talk shows ghettos of elitism? Viewers of "Arsenio" saw Bill Clinton not just playing the saxophone and wearing shades but talking about crime and violence and gangs and urban life for an extended period. (Question: If you wanted to connect young blacks with politics, would you be more successful appearing on "Nightline" or "Arsenio"?)

Were primary voters deprived of real knowledge of the candidates' stands before they voted? This past year, there were not only debates, but pre-primary appearances on such unlikely outlets as "Donahue." (In what may have been the most creative decision of the campaign, Phil Donahue introduced Jerry Brown and Bill Clinton in a joint appearance before the New York primary and then left the stage to the two contenders for an hour.)

And in 1992, the compression of four general election debates into nine days created a sense of excitement and involvement among voters that took advantage of the "sports" metaphor in the best sense: It was like following the World Series, wondering whether yesterday's winner would stumble. In my view, the sense of the campaign as an exciting event was one big reason why turnout was up so substantially.

None of this should be seen as an apology for the way campaigns are covered. Indeed, my disappointment with Patterson's book is not that many of his assertions are wrong; it is that they are so familiar. None of us who critique the media is likely to be cut out of a job anytime soon. And I have no doubt that four or eight or 20 years from now, it will be all too easy to sweep up examples of shallow, inaccurate, or simplistic reporting.

What's missing in *Out of Order*, I think, is any sense that the media's role in campaigns may be subject to powerful currents beyond the nightly newscast or the front page, or any sense that the failings of political journalism may be addressed by new forms of communication. At the end, in the obligatory "reform" chapter that is the campaign book's equivalent of the obligatory sex scene, Patterson proposes shortening the primary season and grouping primaries in clusters. How this would do anything to prevent superficial, strategy-based, issue-starved coverage is beyond me. More significantly, it reads as if Patterson felt himself under a compulsion to come up with some device that would fix the process.

The most helpful portion of the book for a practicing journalist is the mountain of evidence Patterson offers that we journalists have become so jaded, so cynical, so determined to point out the manipulative aspect of campaigns that we have made it harder for our elected officials to develop any bond with the electorate. I think he's dead right about this. I also think the public knows this as well, which is why they were so determined to let the candidates speak for themselves in 1992, and why they may increasingly decide to listen for themselves in the future. This suggests that the American electorate is far less a passive victim of the press's failures than Patterson—and many of my fellow journalists—believe. If I'm right, that should be a cause for celebration. □

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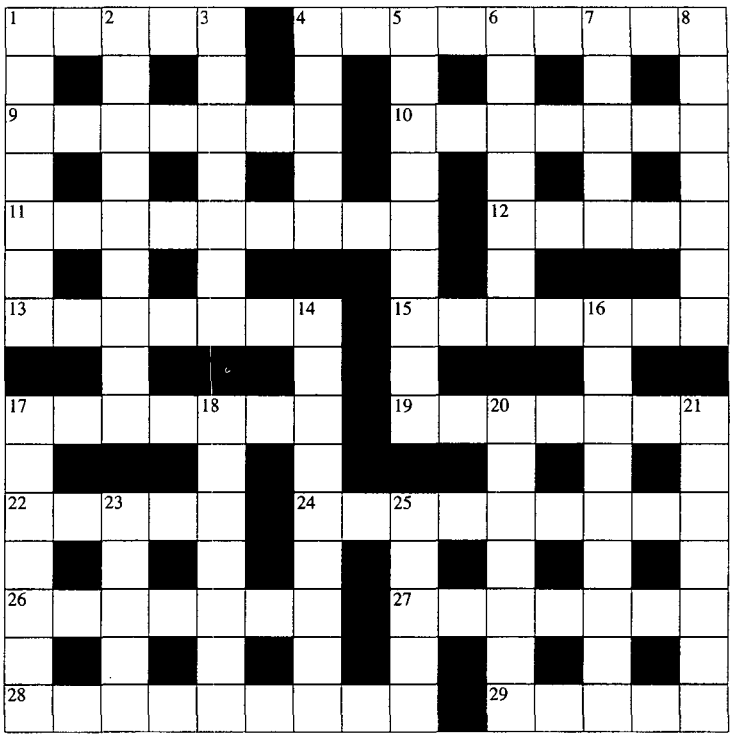
Political Puzzle

BY JOHN BARCLAY

The numbers indicate the number of letters and words, e.g. (2,3) means a two-letter word followed by a three-letter word. Groups of letters, e.g. USA, are treated as one word.



ACROSS

1. Bill passed by DAR assembly. (5)
4. Act out M.I.A. play for object of 1 Across. (9)
9. Come in artfully under it. (7)
10. Number exits slyly before directions. (7)
11. Knock disturbed Red eating. (9)
12. Island queen in catchall reversal. (5)
13. Change tire in time for Red Sea state. (7)
15. Harem figures carelessly shun cue. (7)
17. Fitting lass and footwear. (7)
19. Miscellaneous gathering for host. (2,5)
22. Arm caught in effort to purloin letters. (5)
24. Nothing new about dog lease. (9)
26. Organized apt. limo for the best. (7)
27. Play kiss-the-best. (3,4)
28. Defer rate change for target of 29 Across. (4,5)
29. Reeling toper recently ran for office. (5)

DOWN

1. Certain straps around tip of nose for cow. (7)
2. Tint a note differently for notice. (9)
3. More recent mayor and queen wed. (7)
4. More than one is not avalaible for site of contention. (5)
5. New Seattle vessel is ugly. (9)
6. Neighbor suprisingly came in around ten. (7)
7. Fresh sheet for present objects. (5)
8. Arranges screen around first of tough hikers. (7)
14. Continent nation accepts almost all. (9)
16. Former President in jail for astronaut? Just the opposite! (9)
17. Reorganization of fins and phosphorous compound. (4,3)
18. Company takes in short provisional employee for essay. (7)
20. Settles puff rising endlessly around shattered rims. (5,2)
21. Photos posed before last great center of attention. (7)
23. Los Angeles article is craftshop implement. (5)
25. Some TV is competent without wire service. (5)

Answers to last month's puzzle:

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